

WONDER IN NEVERLAND

THE

NEVERLAND

CURSE

K. A. LAST



THE NEVERLAND CURSE: A PETER PAN AND ALICE IN WONDERLAND MASHUP

Wonder in Neverland Book 3

K. A. Last

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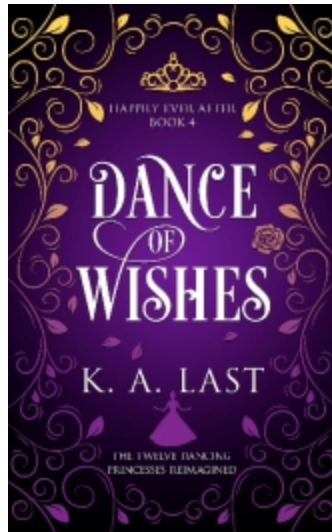
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DEDICATION

For everyone who has ever felt lost, I hope you find your way again.

BREAKING RULES

ALESSA

Vivid images of Wonderland pass over my vision. Playing cards talk to chess pieces. The Mock Turtle and the Gryphon dance with lobsters on the seashore. Hedgehogs roll away from flamingos. A unicorn fights a lion. Impressions of madness surround me, where nothing makes sense but it does all at the same time.

Ronan's hand jolts from mine and I lose him. I cling to Lucy, terrified at the thought of losing her as well, tumbling through the darkness alone. The rabbit hole is playing tricks on my mind, showing me things I've never seen with my own eyes, and I don't know which way is up or down.

Ronan calls my name.

"Ronan," I reply, but I can't find him in the darkness.

Then I hear a grunt. I turn towards the sound of Ronan's voice, but I can't see anything.

"Ronan!" I yell. "Where are you?"

"He's not coming with us," Wesley says.

I search the darkness again, trying to pinpoint the White Rabbit's location. "What do you mean, not coming with us? Where did he go?"

"Back where he belongs."

"He belongs in Wonderland," I counter.

"He was banished for a reason, Alessandria." A vision of Wesley's face passes through my mind. "I can't allow him to return."

“You can’t ... You sent him back to Neverland?” I yell. “Why? You said you would take him home. You said ...”

My chest tightens as my mind fills with the image of Ronan’s face, morphing from the top hat wearing Hatter to the pirate he is now. The images shift through his changing expressions, the way he raises one eyebrow, and lifts the corner of his mouth when he smiles. Then the watch key flashes across my vision. It tumbles through the darkness, and I lift a hand to grab it, but it passes through my fingers like a ghost.

No, come back!

Ronan, come back!

I check my pocket for the timepiece, flicking the cover open beneath the folds of my dress and focusing on it and the key with the heart-shaped bow.

The outline of a rectangle appears in front of me, glowing in the darkness.

“Alessandria, what are you doing?” Wesley calls. “I told you, I’m controlling this rabbit hole.”

A heartbeat later, the door solidifies, the light spilling from the cracks illuminating the features of the wood. Vines decorate the frame and the handle is shaped like a faerie. I wrap my fingers around it and pull, my mind on Ronan and getting him back. Hopefully, he’s just on the other side of the door, and I can bring him through into the rabbit hole with us. A blast of air hits my face, engulfing me, then it sucks me through the doorway.

“Miss Alessa!” Lucy cries, one hand squeezing mine while the other clutches at my gown.

She lands on top of me with a heavy thump. My elbows scrape along rough timber floorboards.

“Alessandria,” Wesley calls again.

When I glance over my shoulder, the door sits open. On the other side, Wesley and Alice tumble down the blackness of the rabbit hole, haloed by an unknown light source. I untangle myself from Lucy and scramble to my feet.

“Alice!” I say.

She stares at me with love-filled eyes, and her lips curl slightly into her ‘everything will be fine’ smile. But leaving her is not an option I want to consider. I step forward, and another gust of wind slams the door closed before I can reach it.

“No!” I cry.

The door disappears, and my heart lurches, as though someone has tried to rip it from my chest. I’ve only just gotten Alice back, and now she’s gone again. I shake my trembling fingers as I try to get my breathing under control.

In chasing after Ronan, I hadn’t considered losing Alice. And I don’t trust Wesley. Not yet. Is Alice safe with him? Will she be all right in Wonderland? She’s waited so long for Wesley to come back to her, and she’s been to Wonderland many times before. I have to hope that she’ll be okay until I can find her again.

“Miss Alessa?” Lucy is at my side.

I look into her wide eyes. “Everything will be ... fine,” I say quietly, attempting to reassure myself as well as my maid. “We’ll find Ronan, and ... everything will be fine.”

When my eyes adjust, I turn in a circle, taking in the rustic space with wooden walls, tables, and chairs. Several groups of people sit at various places around the room, their chatter dying to a low mumble as they stare at us. None of them seem too surprised at our sudden entrance through a magical doorway. Maybe that kind of thing happens here all the time.

Dull morning light spills in through the windows. More light emanates from candles, one set on every table. I face a long high bench with stools set along it. Behind the bar are rows of shelves containing all sorts of bottles. Oil lamps hang above them from the roof.

We're inside. Where did the wind come from?

And if this is Neverland, it seems it makes just as much sense as Wonderland.

I search our surroundings for Ronan, but he's nowhere in sight. Where has he ended up?

"I think we're in an inn," Lucy whispers.

"The Neverdrop Inn, to be precise," a woman behind the bar says. "I'm Toulla. You look like you could both use a drink." She sets two steins in front of us and fills them with a brown liquid. "On the house."

My heart thunders in my ears as I stare at the drinks.

"Could you tell me, please ... Is this place ... is it Neverland?" I worry at my bottom lip, because if it isn't, I'll sound as though I've gone mad.

"Aye," Toulla replies. "Now, drink."

Where are you, Ronan?

Several sets of eyes rest on us standing at the bar. I hesitate, then lift the stein to my lips and take a sip. The rum burns as it slides down my

throat, making me cough, but warmth spreads into my chest and I take another gulp, then grimace. Lucy follows my lead and the voices start up again as the people around us return to their conversations. I put the stein down and look at the barmaid. Hopefully, she'll be able to tell us how to find Ronan.

Then we can get back to Alice.

Boots click on the wooden floor behind us. "What have we here?" someone says before I can ask the barmaid anything.

I spin to face a slender woman as she saunters towards us from the far corner of the room. Fiery red hair frames her face and shoulders. A tricorn shadows her brow. Leather pants encase her long legs, and an under bust corset enhances her ample chest. The woman's hand moves to the hilt of a cutlass at her side.

Another pirate.

Air rushes over my teeth as I take her in. She's beautiful. But she's wearing pants? I've never seen a woman dressed like this.

Lucy presses against my arm, a shiver running into me as she shakes.

"Who are you?" the woman asks, stopping at the end of the bar. "And where did you come from?" She removes her tricorn and pinches it between her fingers.

I set my shoulders back and stand as tall as I can. She looks as though she's the kind of person who likes to intimidate people, and even though fear is twisting through my veins like ice, I'm not about to let her know that.

"My name is Alessandria, and this is Lucy." I deliberately ignore her second question because I don't trust her.

The woman looks me up and down, then her gaze travels over Lucy before flicking back to me. “Nice dress.” She smirks and leans on the bar, slapping the wood with her hand. “Rum, Toulla, if you please.” The woman fixes her stare on me again. “You’re not from around here.”

“Considering we fell through a magical doorway, I should think not.” I smooth my hands over the ruffles of my gown, then glance around the inn. *Where is Ronan?*

“Ah, a smart one,” the pirate woman says. “You’d better watch your mouth. It could get you into trouble.”

I raise my chin. “And who are you, anyway?”

The woman smirks again. “I’m Cordelia, captain of the *Crocodile*.” She sets her hat back on her head.

I open my mouth to respond, but as Cordelia leans her elbow on the bar, something falls free of her shirt collar. My breath catches. *Ronan’s key*. It hangs from a black leather lace threaded through the heart-shaped bow. A soft red glow seeps from the ruby set into the centre of the heart. My fingers flutter over the shape of the pocket watch concealed beneath my dress.

Toulla puts a stein in front of Cordelia. She swipes it up and takes a long draw from the mug. I try not to look at the glowing key, but I can’t help it. It’s exactly how I’ve pictured it in my mind. Cordelia glances down at her chest.

“That’s not yours,” I say.

Cordelia straightens, studying me with an intense stare. “Says who?”

I swallow the lump in my throat. I’ll probably regret being so bold, but that key belongs with the pocket watch. It doesn’t belong to this woman. If

I can get it, then find Ronan, we can get out of here and go to Wonderland.

“Says Ronan.” I take a step towards her.

The noise of chairs scraping on the floor erupts in the corner where five more pirates are now on their feet.

“I dare you to try take it from me.” Cordelia’s lips spread into a wide grin.

Lucy grabs my wrist. “Miss Alessa, we should find Master Ronan first.”

Cordelia cocks her head and runs her gaze over Lucy again. “You should listen to your maid.”

I glance at the other pirates, then glare at Cordelia. “That key isn’t yours.” The shake in my voice betrays me, but I free my wrist from Lucy’s grasp, then take another step forward.

Cordelia wraps her fingers around the hilt of her cutlass and raises her eyebrows. The key glows brighter. All I have to do is lunge and snatch it from her. The leather cord should break easily enough.

I fix my stare on the key and clench my hand.

“I could help you get it back,” a sultry voice says in my ear.

I jump and turn to the man standing close behind me, snagging his gaze. His eyes sparkle like stars and when I try to look away, to refocus on getting Ronan’s key, I find that I can’t.

“We wouldn’t want any harm to come to you via Cordelia’s hand.” The handsome stranger winks, and my knees weaken as something stirs low in my belly.

What is happening?

Cordelia's cutlass scrapes against its scabbard as she pulls it free.

The man beside me pulls out a dagger, his eyes never leaving mine.

"Stop!" someone shouts.

I jolt, the sudden noise breaking my connection with the starry-eyed man, then turn towards the unfamiliar voice. A young woman, only a year or so older than me, stands in the middle of the room, her hands on her hips. Her blonde hair tumbles from beneath the blue scarf wrapped around her head. She wears a long coat, an under bust corset over a cream shirt, and knee-high boots over leather pants. Another woman wearing pants! Her eyes are a piercing blue, and somehow, she makes Cordelia look ... plain.

"Just when it was getting interesting." Toulla walks to the other end of the bar and busies herself with cleaning steins.

"You know the rules," the young woman says, glaring at Cordelia.

"Aye, but they don't." Cordelia waves her cutlass at Lucy and me before sitting at the bar and ordering another drink.

"You can't touch them, you know that." Blue Headscarf moves closer, her hands on the hilts of two cutlasses, one on either hip. Then she fixes her dagger eyes on the man beside me. "Get away from her, Peter. Or I'll gut you like the slimy eel that you are."

"I'd like to see you try." The man snarls, but he sheaths his weapon and saunters to the other end of the bar where Toulla plonks a stein in front of him. With great effort, I tug my eyes away from him, not sure why he has me so transfixed.

The pirate girl smiles with her lips closed. "I'm Wendeline. You know Ronan?"

“Sort of,” I say, because I don’t really *know* him. “He landed on top of me when he came through a magical doorway.”

“Ah, you’re *that* girl.” She scowls. “Where exactly are you from?”

Laughter erupts from the end of the bar, and Peter turns to look at us. “Bloody Ronan. Seems he likes to break rules, now doesn’t he?”

“And who’s rules would that be?” Wendeline plants her hands on her hips.

“I only had one, and that was no one could ever leave.” Peter rubs his chin. “Looks like he left Neverland and found himself a replacement for you.”

Wendeline’s jaw visibly tightens, and she narrows her glare at Peter.

A deep scowl mars his face, and he clenches his hands into tight fists. A tiny girl in a green dress flits over to sit on his shoulder. Translucent wings, like a dragonfly’s, move slowly at her back. A *faerie*! A frown mars her petite features, but she seems more annoyed than angry. Two other boys come to stand at the end of the bar, both of them dressed in torn, dirty clothing, as though they’ve been sleeping in the forest.

Cordelia chuckles. “I could carve the air with my cutlass right about now. The hatred dripping off you two is wonderfully palpable.” She looks from Wendeline to Peter, then back again. “Maybe we should find out what happens to rule breakers. I’m curious.”

“What’s the bet nothing happens?” Peter launches off his stool and steps towards us, and the faerie tumbles from his shoulder as he stomps along. He stops and glares at Wendeline. “Tell us the truth, Wendie. My guess is, Ronan has been fooling us all this time.” He pulls out his dagger

again and presses the tip to her cheek. “What will happen if I kill you now?”

I hold my breath as a bead of blood forms on Wendeline’s cheek. Something is not right about this man. Moments ago, it was as though he was trying to seduce me. Now, he’s acting like a madman, about to throw a very dangerous tantrum.

More people move towards Wendeline. A young man with curly blond hair, a stout gentleman with a red cap, and another young female pirate with jet black hair in braids. Wendeline holds her hand out and they back off a little, but come around to flank her.

“Then you really are a fool,” she replies to Peter, taking a step back.

She wipes her cheek with the back of her hand, and I glance at the scarlet smear, my stomach churning. Lucy whimpers beside me, my arm throbbing from where she is now clutching my elbow.

The green faerie circles around to face Wendeline, hovering in front of Peter.

“You’re the fool,” she taunts.

Peter swats her away, sending her spinning to the floor, where she lands in a shower of green glitter.

“Peter!” she cries.

“Be quiet, Tink,” he says, his gaze still trained on Wendeline. “This is between Wendie and me.”

“You can’t make Neverland what it was,” Wendeline says, her voice even.

He shakes his fist. "What it was, was so much better than this!" He spreads his arms wide. "We had so many adventures when I was in charge. This is just ... boring."

"Well, maybe you should have thought about that before you pissed Ronan off, and then murdered my brother," Wendeline says, her voice rising. "You need to grow up, Peter. Not everything is about you. And I, for one, prefer Neverland now. You ... I don't even want to waste any more air on you."

"He murdered your brother?" I whisper.

More voices pipe up until I can't decipher enough words to make sense, and everyone is shouting at whoever will listen. Lucy lets go of my elbow, slipping her hand into mine, and we press our backs against the bar. I glance frantically around, searching for the exit. But where would we go?

Crack!

My heart leaps into my throat, and the walls shake as a clap as loud as thunder echoes off the walls. Light flashes above us, like lightning. But that's impossible. We're inside. Some people duck, others dive under tables. Peter flies backwards and slams into the wall, landing on the floor in a heap. The shouting drops to a murmur.

I look to where Wendeline stands with her hand in front of her, clutching something in her fingers.

"Who wants to ask me again what happens when someone breaks the rules?" She moves her glare around the room until it finally rests on Peter. "Face it, Pan. Neverland is not yours anymore. But mark my words, taking it from you is only the beginning. I have a whole lot of vengeance in store for you."

He gets to his feet and takes a step towards Wendeline, his fists clenched until his knuckles are white. He opens his mouth, but the green faerie stops his words with a slap across his cheek.

Peter rubs his face and scowls. "Whose side are you on?"

"Ugh!" she cries. "I can't believe you drew her blood! You're a silly ass, Peter. I don't know why I stick around."

"No one's making you." He glares at her.

She shakes her head and scowls, then darts out an open window, leaving a trail of green glitter in her wake.

Something pink streaks out from behind Wendeline.

Another faerie!

"Good riddance." The pink faerie shakes her fist, then sits on Wendeline's shoulder. "You should follow her." She jabs a finger towards Peter.

Wendeline flips a round black stone over the back of her knuckles. She glares at Cordelia. "Are we done?"

Cordelia returns her cutlass to its scabbard. "No. This isn't over."

"It never is." Wendeline grumbles. "Now, run along, children." She flicks her hand at Peter and the boys standing with him. "Go back to playing in your treehouse."

His jaw clenches, but he backs away and returns to a table with his scruffy friends, all the while glaring at Wendeline. Cordelia rejoins her pirate crew, and I let out a long breath. The three who flanked Wendeline earlier return to their seats as well, and the little pink faerie flits over to join them, perching on the girl's shoulder.

“Where are you from?” Wendeline asks again, taking a seat at the bar. “I could guess, but it’s more fun if you tell me.” Toulla pours her a rum without needing to be asked.

Lucy tugs on my hand. “I’m not sure we should tell her anything,” she whispers.

Wendeline takes a gulp of her drink and looks at us askance.

“If she wanted to hurt us, she would have by now,” I whisper back.

Of all the people in this place, so far Wendeline seems to be the best one to befriend.

“Where the hell did Ronan find you two?” Wendeline angles her body towards us and rests her elbow on the bar. “Girls like you ...” She looks me up and down. “Not really his type.”

I slip onto the barstool two down from the pirate girl and study her. The look in her eyes is challenging. Not his type? What is Ronan’s type? Her? A pirate? Is she jealous? Do I even care?

My heart flutters at the memory of Ronan’s warm breath against my cheek, and the feeling of his hand on my waist as we danced. That Lucy told him she thought he was courting me.

Yes, I care.

But the last thing I want is to start a fight with Wendeline, verbal or otherwise.

“The fancy dress. The maid,” Wendeline continues, looking Lucy over again. “My guess is you lot are from London.”

I suck in a breath. “How do you know that?”

“For starters, you talk like I used to. I might have been there before ... In another life.”

“What is that stone?” I ask, to take the focus off any details about Lucy and me.

Wendeline flips it across her knuckles again. “Thunder stone. It can harness the power of a storm.”

I stare at the stone as it moves over her deft fingers.

“It’s so ... small,” Lucy says.

“Trust me, you don’t want to see it at its full potential.”

“Is that what pulled us through the doorway?” I ask.

Wendeline scoffs. “No. Why would I want to bring the likes of you two to Neverland?”

“Then where did the wind come from?” I narrow my eyes, not liking her tone.

Wendeline shrugs, then takes another draw from her stein. Lucy hasn’t touched her drink again. I lift mine and take another sip. The small amount of rum I’ve had is more than Father has ever allowed me to drink. Each sip becomes easier to take, but the alcohol combined with the noise in the inn creeps into my head, and the start of a headache presses at my temples.

“How do you know Ronan?” I ask, setting my drink back on the bar.

Wendeline doesn’t immediately answer, as though she’s weighing up whether she should tell us anything. She stares at the thunder stone as it dances over the back of her hand. “Who opened the doorway you came through?”

“I asked my question first,” I retort.

Wendeline looks at Lucy. "I don't like playing games. Who opened that door?"

"Don't answer her." I glance up at Lucy, where she stands at my side, her hands clasped in front of her. Lucy's mouth is slightly open, but she clamps it shut. If Wendeline can hold her cards close to her chest, so can we.

Wendeline laughs. "It's no fun taking orders, is it?"

Lucy's mouth puckers, then she frowns. "I don't see Miss Alessa's requests as orders."

"How do you know Ronan?" I ask again. "Answer me, and I'll answer you."

Wendeline taps her stein and Toulla refills it. The pirate girl takes a long drink, then wipes her mouth with the back of her hand.

"He's my captain. I'm his quartermaster." She holds my stare.

"Do you know where he is?"

"Your turn," Wendeline says.

I press my lips together, not wanting to tell her anything about myself or what I think I can do. I don't even know how it all works. It could just be the pocket watch doing all the work. But I agreed to answer her. Although, I didn't agree to tell the truth.

"I don't know how the doorway opened. It just did."

"It just ... opened?" Wendeline raises her eyebrows.

"Do I look like I want to be here?" I glare at her. "Now, have you seen Ronan?"

Wendeline scowls. "Not since he fell on you."

Heat creeps into my cheeks and I look away. Cordelia catches my eye from the corner. She smirks, but I drop my gaze to her chest in search of Ronan's key. A faint red glow pulses beneath the fabric of her shirt.

"We have to find him." I turn back to Wendeline, lean closer, and lower my voice. "We have to get that key from Cordelia."

Wendeline scoffs and slams her stein on the bar. "Seriously? Not you, too."

DAMN NEAR IMPOSSIBLE

RONAN

Of all the places for me to end up in Neverland with no faerie dust, it has to be Wonderheart Lighthouse. The cliffs that surround the small island are the most treacherous, and I should know ... I created the damn place.

I stare at the top hat sitting at my feet. The ache in my hip spreads into my legs as I reach down to retrieve it. I set it on my head, then take a few stiff steps, turning my back to the rising sun to scan my surroundings. Why have I ended up here? Wesley was in control of the rabbit hole. He said we were going to Wonderland, so I should be in Wonderland with the others. Is Alessa there without me? Or did she get sent here as well? Are they all here, and we've been separated?

What is going on?

I grip my hair and pull, frustration coursing through me. I'm sounding like Alessa with all the bloody questions, and my mind fills with a million possibilities, all vying for my attention. I can't decipher any of my messed-up thoughts.

Tick-tock.

Forget.

Is Alessa still with Wesley?

I shudder at the thought, not because I think he might hurt her, but because he might tell her things about me I'm not ready for her to know. Things I can't even remember correctly myself.

Maybe Alessa will open a doorway and follow me. She knows how to do that now. At least, I think she does. She still has the pocket watch, and she made a door at the manor just before Wesley arrived.

But would she want to do that?

She's with her sister.

Why would she care about me?

Still, I'm hopeful.

I hold my breath, cock my head, and listen.

The waves crash onto the rocks below.

The Neverbird caws across the water.

But I hear nothing to indicate I have company.

And no magic doorway appears.

If I was in Alessa's situation, I wouldn't follow an arrogant pirate over my own family. Actually, I would. But I'm not Alessa. Even if she isn't with me, which I'd rather she was, at least now I have another chance to get my key.

But I need to get off this blasted island first.

Which is damn near impossible when I can't fly.

The pouch on my belt is empty.

And there are no faeries in sight.

I shuffle to the edge of the cliff and look at the foaming water below. My boot sends some pebbles skittering over the side, and they ricochet off the jagged rocks. If I scale the side of the cliff, I'm likely to fall to my

death. Even if I do make it to the water, the swim across Pixie Channel will kill me instead.

Curse me for protecting the source of Neverland's power so well.

There are certain people I want to keep away from Wonderheart Lighthouse. Mainly Pan. I've had enough altercations with the boy to know he acts first and thinks later. He would destroy the lighthouse to spite me. But if that ever happened, everything I've built in Neverland would go with it. Hence the razor-sharp cliffs and impenetrable building. If I could stop anyone from flying up here, I would, but access to faerie dust is too easy, especially since Peter has Tink on his side.

I move away from the edge and stare up at the lighthouse. The light beam is there, but I can't see it now that the sun has risen. Still, it protects Neverland even if it is invisible during the daylight hours.

I turn in a circle again and scan the horizon. There's no sign of *Vengeance* bobbing on the surface of the sea, but that doesn't mean she's not out there somewhere. I can call Wendeline with my mershell, and my crew will come to get me.

My hip is still throbbing and I wince as I dig into my satchel, searching for my mershell. I find it under the folded page from Alice's journal, then pull out a piece. *Bloody hell!* I must have landed on it when I fell. No wonder my hip hurts so damn much. Mershells are strong.

It seems calling Wendeline isn't an option, and I have no way off this rock without help.

I slip the broken shell back into my satchel and look directly across the channel to the main island at Tiger Lily's Garden. It's where the faeries

live, and they are added protection for the lighthouse. If I yell loud enough, maybe they'll hear me.

"Tiger Lily!" I call with my hand cupped around my mouth. "Daisy! Is anyone there?"

I hold my breath and listen, but my voice just echoes across the water and no one returns my call. Then I spy a green, glittery streak that's gone as quickly as it came. Faeries move really fast when they want to, but I've gotten used to spotting them flitting around the place.

The only green faerie I know is Tinker Bell.

What's she doing out here?

Tink never ventures too close to Tiger Lily's Garden. The other faeries don't like her, so this is the last place I would expect to see her. She's usually over on Pan's Neverland, getting up to mischief with the remaining Lost Boys. That, or she's following Pan around as though she's his shadow.

I move towards the edge of the cliff where I saw her streak disappear. On hands and knees, I crawl to the crumbly lip, the tip of my hook digging into the ground. Then I drop to my belly and peer over. The waves crash against the rocks far below, the sea roaring as it churns around the island and through the channel.

Tinker Bell's sniffles float on the air, and I hear her before I see her. If she wasn't so glittery, she would be completely camouflaged against the browns and greens of the plant life that cling to the island walls. She's sitting on a rock jutting from the steep cliff face, her knees pulled to her chest and her wings wrapped around her.

"Tink," I call.

I reach over and strike a rock with my hook to get her attention. Small stones skitter down around her, and she turns her face up to me.

“Leave ... me ... alone,” she says through sobbing hiccups.

“What’s the matter with you?” I ask.

“Why do you care?” She blinks up at me.

“I don’t, really.”

“You, and everyone else.” She buries her face in her arms.

“I guess now is not the time to ask for help, then?” I say over the pounding waves.

Tinker Bell lifts her head again and glares at me. “You want my help? This is all your fault, you know,” she yells. “If you hadn’t come here, everything would’ve stayed how it was.”

Oh, we’re going there, are we?

“You really want to go back to the way things were?” I yell, gripping the dirt with my hand. “You were Pan’s slave. Everyone was. He was using you for his own amusement. At least now you’re safe, and you can make your own choices. You should’ve come with Wendie when you had the chance.”

“So I could be *your* slave instead?” She shakes her head. “No way. I feel sorry for Rose, always at your beck and call.”

“She is not,” I retort. “If she was, she’d be here now.”

Tink studies me for a moment, her jaw clenched. “What is that ridiculous thing on your head? I haven’t seen you in a top hat since ...”

Tinker Bell trails off. Even she’s not mean enough to talk about what happened to the Jolly Roger. The day she sank is a day many in Neverland

would rather forget.

“I’m rediscovering my roots,” I say, forcing a smile.

“I thought you hated Wonderland.”

I readjust the hat so it sits askew. “Some of the people, yes. Wonderland itself ... no, I don’t hate it. You know I’m trying to get back.”

“And you know I’ve wished you’d actually go.” Tinker Bell rubs her eyes with her tiny fists. “You’re stuck up there, aren’t you? Wendie and Rose can’t come to the rescue?”

“Aye, you could say that. How about you give me a hand?” I wave my hook, wink, and offer her my most charming smile.

“I can’t help you,” Tink says, shaking her head. “Peter would be most upset.”

“Who cares what he thinks? He’s an arrogant, murdering bastard, and he’s downright annoying. And you can’t keep living in his shadow.”

Tinker Bell snorts. “Ha. I see what you did there.”

“Come on, Tink, I’m serious,” I say. “Why do you care about him? He’s caused you nothing but heartache. He causes everyone heartache.”

She stares at me with her big, round eyes. “He accepts me for who I am.” But the tone of her voice suggests she believes otherwise.

“Do you like who you are when you’re around him? Because he has a habit of bringing out the worst in people.”

Tink’s face reddens. “You don’t like me, do you? You’ve never liked me.”

I run my hand down my face and take a deep breath. “It’s not that I don’t like *you*. It’s just, Peter is a murderer. And you shouldn’t let him

dictate who you are. If you be yourself, then people will like you for you, not who someone else wants you to be. Stop trying to be someone you're not."

Maybe I should take my own advice.

"How do I do that?" Her features soften, and a tear slips down her cheek. "I don't know how to be myself. Who am I, anyway?"

"You're ... a little lost."

Tinker Bell stands from her seat on the rock and flutters up to hover in front of me. "Everyone in Neverland is lost."

I stare at her for a moment as her beating wings shed green glitter around her.

"Aye," I say. "All the more reason to help me. All I need is a little faerie dust."

"No way." She darts back, holding her hands out. "The last time I gave my dust to someone, it got me in a whole lot of trouble."

"Then at least fly me to the main island," I say. "Please?"

"What do I get in return?"

"My undying gratitude?"

"I want to live in the garden." Tinker Bell puts her hands on her hips.

I raise an eyebrow. "With the other faeries?"

"Yes, and if you can't make that happen, then you're stuck here."

"I'll talk to Tiger Lily," I say.

"No." She shakes her head. "You'll tell her."

I push up to my knees, jump to my feet, then brush my hand off on my pants. “How is that any better than Pan ordering you around?”

Tinker Bell pouts and her shoulders slump. “Fine. But you’ll ask her?”

“I promise.” I put my hook over my heart. “Now, how about a lift?”

Tinker Bell darts forward so quickly I step back. She giggles, then circles me, dropping green glitter onto my skin and clothes. Then she grabs the back of my collar and drags me into the air. We shoot out over Pixie Channel, and I pinwheel my arms, unable to take control of the flight while she’s holding on to me.

The water in the channel churns below, the sunlight glinting off its surface. We fly over the tree tops of Tiger Lily’s Garden, then Tinker Bell swerves sharply to the left and dives. My legs trail out behind us, and the water just off the coast comes at us fast.

“What are you doing?” I yell.

She doesn’t answer, swerving again. Then she lets go of me.

“Tink—!” I plunge into the water.

It fills my mouth and nose, and I scramble to stop myself from going any deeper. I much prefer being on the Neversea rather than in it. Some of the mermaids of Neverland aren’t particularly fond of me. If I don’t get out of the water soon, they’re likely to show up.

I kick towards the surface and draw in a gasping breath as my face breaks the water. My top hat floats beside me. Tinker Bell flies just out of reach, her hands on her hips, and her mouth turned up into a cheeky smile.

“What was that for?” I shout, grabbing my hat and setting it on my head. Salty water runs down into my eyes.

“So you don’t go flying off with my faerie dust. And because you’re an ass, Ronan.” She giggles, then pokes her tongue out at me. “All men are.”

I clench my teeth. “I’m not all men. And I guess I won’t be talking to Tiger Lily after all.”

Tinker Bell’s eyes widen. “Oh, no! You promised. You put your hook over your heart and everything.”

“Funny how you trusted me.” I glare at her, then swim towards shore. “Just like I trusted you before you threw me to the mermaids.”

The little green faerie floats along beside me, twisting her hands together. “Please. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it. I ... slipped.”

I scoff. “I’m a pirate, Tink. Not an idiot. You just can’t help getting up to mischief. Wendeline told me what you tried to do to her when she first arrived in Neverland.” My feet hit the sand as I come into the shallows. “Get out of here before I wet you and you can’t fly.”

“You wouldn’t!” She darts away.

I scoop some water into my hand and splash it towards her. “I would!”

“You really are an ass,” she yells before flitting higher into the air, then turning to a green streak as she shoots away towards Neverdrop.

My feet squelch in my boots as I trudge up the shore, the waves jostling at my ankles. Every inch of me is soaked through. *Curse that blasted faerie!* I open my satchel and peer inside.

The shrinking potion is fine, the corks still tightly wedged in the tops of the bottles, but the growing cake will be wet. It’s wrapped in cloth, so best to leave it alone until it dries out. The page from Alice’s journal is wet and stuck together, and the ink has run. I wanted to find out what it

said before I gave it to Alessa, but that damn faerie has ruined it. I drop to my knees in the sand. Careful not to tear it, I prise the paper apart and lay it on my thigh. Then I dig into my satchel again and find my white stone.

A gift from Nerida, the mermaid of the lake, the glacier stone has the power to control the sea. It can also turn water to ice, and vice versa. My leg turns painfully cold as I run the stone over the paper. It crackles as it freezes, forming a thin sheet of frosted ice on the surface. I set the stone back in my satchel, then tap the centre of the page with the tip of my hook. Cracks spiderweb out to the edges, and I hope the paper beneath doesn't fall to pieces.

Using my hook, I gently scrape the ice away, then turn the paper over and do the same to the other side. Instead of folding it, I roll it up, hoping whatever is written on it will stay intact, then slip it into the top of my damp satchel. It will have to do for now until I can get back on board *Vengeance*.

I stand and face the sea, scanning the waters from Dead Man Passage around to Pixie Channel, but there's still no sign of my ship. She's probably anchored off Neverdrop with my crew. I wonder if Wendie is worried. Of course she would be, but she'd never admit it.

Neverdrop is the logical place to find Wendie, and since I can't contact her, it's as good a place to start as any. My boots sink into the sand as I walk up the beach and into the surrounding grassland.

The fastest way, besides flying, to get to Neverdrop, or anywhere in Neverland, is to use the Time Tunnels, but the entrance is a decent walk away.

It could be worse. I could still be up at the lighthouse.

But it could also be better. I could have Alessa by my side.

My feet squelch in my boots as I walk, but I put my dishevelled state aside and focus all my thoughts on getting to the Neverdrop Inn, preparing myself for the quick trip through the Time Tunnels. When I reach the entrance, my feet ache as much as my hip, unused to walking because I usually fly.

Vines cover the cave mouth and I reach out to pull them aside. A breeze whispers around me, rustling the vines. Water drips from my clothing and forms a puddle at my feet, but there's no way I'm using my glacier stone on myself. I don't fancy turning into a block of ice.

"Neverdrop Inn, here and now," I mumble, picturing it in my mind.

Then I step through into the darkness.

OTHER THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

ALESSA

Wendeline shakes her head. “I can’t believe he’s sucked you into his infernal quest. That key will be the death of him. And you, if you’re not careful.”

I open my mouth to tell her about the pocket watch, but shut it again. Although she seems far nicer than Cordelia, I’m not sure if I can completely trust Wendeline yet, so I should probably keep quiet until I see Ronan.

Lucy touches my arm, then points to the far-left corner of the room. “Miss Alessa. Look.”

“What is that?” I slip off the barstool and stand.

The air shimmers and ripples as though it has turned to water. Then Ronan appears, dripping wet, his legs and boots caked with sand. His top hat sits askew, and his hair is plastered to the side of his face. His dark brows are drawn down over his eyes.

“Ronan!” I run towards him.

The young man with the curly hair jumps to his feet and calls to Ronan as well. Ronan ignores him and strides forward, his arms out as though he’s about to hug me. I swat his hand away. The last thing I want is a dirty, bedraggled pirate touching me.

Or do I?

He grabs my wrist and pulls me to him, wrapping his hook arm around me. The water from his clothing clings to my skin. He smells like the ocean. All salt, and seaweed, and sunshine.

I push him away, but he holds me fast. “Are you all right, love?”

Love, not lass. I nod, even though I’m far from all right.

This is the closest I’ve been to him since the first time he asked to see Alice’s pocket watch. He was intimidating then, and he is now, but I’m not afraid of him this time. This time, I don’t want him to move away.

“Ronan, are you good?” Curly Hair asks.

“Aye, nothing to worry about,” he replies, keeping his stare on me.

Nothing to worry about? Is he insane? Of course he is. He’s the Hatter.

Something smacks Ronan in the face, and he flinches. Pink glitter falls onto his shoulder.

“Where have you been?” the faerie demands.

“Nice to see you, too, Rose.” Ronan releases my wrist and wipes the faerie dust from his cheek. “Be a good faerie and go sit with Wendie, would you?”

Rose puts her tiny hands on her hips and scowls, but she does as Ronan asked, Flitting over to Wendeline.

“What happened?” I finally manage to squeak out.

“Ah, there’s my Alessa. Always with the questions.” He winks. “I was hoping you could tell me.”

I look up into his eyes. “Wesley ... He did something. And you disappeared.” My voice comes out in a croaky whisper. “He said he couldn’t allow you to return to Wonderland.”

“That no good, back stabbing bastard,” Ronan grumbles. “How did you get here?”

I take a deep breath. “One moment you had my hand, then the next, you were gone. The rabbit hole was messing with my mind. Showing me all sorts of things. But all I wanted was to find you, so I did the only thing I could think of. I pictured the pocket watch and the key, and a door opened. It sucked Lucy and me through. It all happened so fast. But now I’ve lost Alice again. I need to get back to her. But I was worried about you. And we ended up here. And a crazy pirate lady was rude to us. And a boy tried to help me, but I don’t think he was sincere. Then he cut Wendeline’s cheek.”

“Alessa,” Ronan says. “Calm down. I thought you said you were all right.”

“Well, I’m not,” I whisper shout, my hands shaking. “I’ve fallen through a magical doorway and I’ve lost Alice!”

“Who cut Wendie’s cheek?”

“That’s what you took from all of this?” I stare at him wide-eyed.

“We’re in Neverdrop. Drawing blood is against the rules. Did it touch the ground?”

“Look what the mermaids dragged in,” Wendeline says from the bar.

Ronan moves his head slightly. “Just ignore her,” he whispers in my ear. “I do.”

“That’s not very nice.” I shake my head.

“No, it didn’t.” Wendeline glares at him over the top of her stein. “I’m fine, by the way.”

Ronan ignores her, and I glance over his shoulder to the corner, wishing there was a portal to Wonderland so I can go find Alice, but the shimmery air is gone.

Ronan twists, following my stare, but his arm stays snaked around me.

“You can walk through ... rippling pieces of air?” I ask, my mind a jumbled mess and unable to focus on one thing for too long.

“It’s ... I’ll explain later. We better go and sit at the bar,” Ronan says. “Lucy looks like she’s about to die of fright, and we have a lot to discuss.”

I turn towards my maid and offer her a smile, hoping she can’t tell it’s forced. She returns it, but she’s wringing her hands. Maybe I should have left her at home with Father. She would probably have found him easier to take than this madness.

“The key is here,” I say, keeping my voice low as we walk towards Lucy and Wendeline.

Ronan’s gaze darts around the room. “Cordelia.” He clenches his fist.

“She’s very—”

“Infuriating.” Ronan cuts me off.

“I was going to say interesting.” I slip onto a barstool.

Wendeline snorts but doesn’t say anything. All eyes in the establishment are on us, and the talking has dropped to a low murmur again. I really wish these people would mind their own business. Their stares are more unnerving than having a pirate fall on me through a magical doorway.

Ronan reaches up and touches the smear of dried blood on Wendeline’s cheek. My insides twist, and I have to force myself not to scowl.

“Who cut you?” Ronan asks, dropping his hand and pulling a soggy handkerchief from his lapel pocket.

“I’ll give you one guess.” Wendie takes the cloth and wipes her cheek before tossing it on the bar.

“Pan.” Ronan’s gaze settles on Peter at a table up the back, a couple over from Cordelia’s group in the corner.

Pan leers at him from around one of the other boys, and although I know his expression is unsavoury, and apparently, he’s a murderer, I can’t help becoming transfixed by his eyes.

“I handled it,” Wendeline says.

Her voice pulls me back to the present and I fix my stare on Ronan again.

“Good,” he says. “Because we’ve got other things to think about right now.”

He waves the guy with the curly hair over. The man with the red cap and the other pirate girl follow him. The three of them take seats at the end of the bar. The girl has a friendly face, framed by black hair filled with beaded plaits.

Lucy’s eyes dart around the room continuously, as though she’s waiting for someone or something to jump at her at any moment. I feel the same, but I’m trying my best to keep my fear in check. We can’t let these strangers know we’re afraid.

I reach for Lucy’s hands and get her to sit beside me. “It will be all right.” Although, how can I convince her when I don’t believe it myself?

“I thought we were going to retrieve Miss Alice,” Lucy says, her voice trembling. “I didn’t know we would end up ...”

“In a bar full of villainous pirates?” Ronan smirks.

“Speak for yourself,” Wendeline says, punching him on the shoulder. “What the hell happened to you, anyway?”

He frowns, removing his water-logged top hat and setting it on the bar. “Tink happened.”

“Oh! She didn’t.” The pink faerie jumps onto the bar and faces us. “She needs a good talking to.”

Tink? The little green faerie did this to Ronan? I take in his dishevelled state. Most of the sand has fallen off his boots and pants, but he’s still a wet mess.

“Well.” Wendeline chuckles. “She left here in a bit of a mood.”

“And I copped the brunt of it.”

Curly Hair laughs loudly and pounds his fist on the bar.

“Shut it, Curly,” Ronan growls. “She’s a whole lot of mean for a faerie.”

“His name is Curly?” I ask, trying not to laugh, because I’ve been calling him that in my head.

“Aye.” Ronan steps back so I can see his friends. “This is Nathaniel, but we like to call him Curly, for obvious reasons.” The lad tips his finger to his brow and smiles. “The man with the cap is Alistair Smee, my bo’sun,” Ronan continues. “We just call him Smee. And the lovely lady is Jessie. She’s also a member of my crew. Everyone, this is Alessa and Lucy.”

Smee offers me a nervous nod, and Jessie smiles so nicely that I can't help smiling back.

"Ah-hem," the pink faerie clears her throat.

"And this is Rose, my ship faerie," Ronan says.

"Pleased to meet you." She holds out the edges of her skirt and dips into a delicate curtsy.

"Oh great," Jessie says, and I follow her line of sight.

Cordelia and her crew get to their feet in a noisy show of shouts and chairs scraping on the floor. The pirate woman steps out front, flanked by her men, and walks towards the bar. I tense, holding my breath, unsure if she intends to leave quietly or make a scene. First impressions tell me she's not the kind of woman to do anything quietly.

Ronan takes a step towards Cordelia.

Wendeline grabs his arm. "Don't. I've already calmed the storm once this morning."

"She has my key."

"And you've been gone. Forget Cordelia. We need to regroup."

The tone of Wendeline's voice hints at annoyance but is laced with concern. Her hand is still on his arm, and that, coupled with the way she's staring at Ronan, stirs something in my chest. At least he's not returning her look of longing. He's too focused on Cordelia.

The pirate woman saunters past, pausing to glare at Ronan before moving to the steps at the front door of the inn. The rest of the patrons have quieted again, and the tension is palpable.

She stops and turns to face us. "We haven't finished our duel, Ronan."

He doesn't reply, and I steady my breaths as Cordelia and her crew leave, the door slamming in their wake. My breath rushes out between my lips, and I press my palm to my chest. So far, being in Neverland is rather stressful.

"Forget her?" Ronan glares at Wendeline. "You've obviously forgotten who I am."

Wendeline sighs. "No, I haven't. That's the problem. I just don't get what's so important about that bloody key. You don't even have the pocket watch it goes with."

Ronan glances at me before looking back at Wendeline. "It's bloody important because it's mine. And it could be the answer to finally getting back to Wonderland. End of discussion."

Wendeline stares at Ronan, her mouth slightly open as though she wants to reply, but then she seems to think better of it and scowls instead.

He didn't tell her I have the pocket watch. Does he want to keep it a secret from her? Why? Before I can ask, more chairs scrape on the floor. The boy the green faerie called Peter walks towards the exit, followed by the other two scruffy lads. Peter shoulders Ronan on the way past, and throws him a glare that makes my heart jump, then leaves the inn. Ronan doesn't seem too popular around here.

"That boy, Peter, is it?" I look at Ronan. "He doesn't like you much, does he?"

Ronan scrubs his fingers through his wet hair, shaking droplets onto my arms. "Believe me, the feeling is mutual. Peter is not someone you want to get to know. And besides, the only people who like me around here

are Toulla and my crew.” He glances at Wendeline. “And even that’s debatable.”

Her scowl deepens, then she looks away. Is he blind? Of course Wendeline likes him. More than Ronan obviously knows. And since she’s his quartermaster, I’m hoping their relationship is strictly professional. Although, it’s not my place to want that. It’s not my place to want anything here!

The only thing I do want is to get back to Alice.

I look down at my beautiful ball gown and remember that I’m supposed to be twirling around the dancefloor with a man who could be my future husband. Not sitting at a bar in a fantasy land that shouldn’t even exist.

I’m completely and utterly out of place here.

“What do we do now?” I ask, staring at my hands.

Ronan comes to me, lifts my chin with his finger, and smiles. “What I always do when things go walrus. Have a drink.”

He slips onto the stool beside me, and Lucy and I shuffle in our seats so we’re facing the bar. Toulla already has a stein filled, and she passes it to Ronan.

“The day you lot stop peppering each other is the day I’ll cease to be amused,” the barmaid says.

“Never going to happen.” Ronan raises his stein to her then drinks, guzzling the whole mug of rum in one go. He sets the stein down, and Toulla refills it, then retreats to the other end of the bar.

Wendeline lays a cutlass in front of Ronan. She takes the seat on his other side, then leans her elbow on the bar and angles her body to face him.

“Did you sharpen it?” he asks, wrapping his fingers around the hilt.

“Aye,” she replies.

“What happened after I left?” Ronan slips the weapon into the scabbard on his hip, then takes another drink.

“Cordelia was angry,” Wendeline says. “She cursed and swore she almost had you. That she would’ve won.”

Ronan scoffs. “I guess we’ll never know.”

“She wanted me to fight for you.” Wendeline stares at Ronan, her eyes darkening. “I told her I want none of it. The quarrel is between you and her. Then Rose and I returned to *Vengeance*.”

Ronan runs his finger around the rim of his stein. “How long have I been gone?”

Wendeline hesitates. “A little over two weeks.”

Ronan’s hand stills, and his jaw clenches. “Did you search for me?”

Wendeline shakes her head and lets out a humourless laugh. “Yes. Do you really think I would abandon you?”

She touches Ronan’s arm, but he adjusts his position, resting his elbows on the bar and picking his fingernails with the tip of his hook. Something in his expression suggests that at some point, Ronan did believe she would abandon him. There’s so much I don’t know about him, but instincts tell me he’s definitely more Hatter than pirate. He dips his head and rubs his cheek with his hook.

“Two weeks?” I ask. “How is that possible? You fell on me only a few days ago.”

Ronan upends his stein, gulping down the last of his rum, then gets to his feet and takes a few steps away from the bar. “Time works differently in Neverland. It’s ... unpredictable. This time it was two weeks. Next time it could be a day. It all depends on which way Time is running. Much the same as Wonderland.”

I stare at him, a hundred questions on the tip of my tongue, but I have no idea which one to ask first.

Ronan runs his hand over his hair again, then rests it on the hilt of his cutlass as he paces the length of the bar. His head is bowed, and his brow creased, as though he is trying to work a complicated math problem and can’t quite grasp the answer.

“Alessa?” He stops and faces me. “Can I talk to you outside for a moment?”

Before I can reply, Ronan strides towards the door. The others watch his back as he goes. Wendeline glares at me, and my stomach flips at the thought of having to answer to her when she’s angry. I look at Lucy, but she smiles and gives me a nudge. I slip off the barstool and follow Ronan outside into the morning sunshine.

The inn stands at the end of a short row of terrace houses. I glance both ways along the road. To the west, it snakes into a dense forest. To the east, the road meanders close to the shoreline. Across the road is the port. In dry dock sits a ship, with people shuffling about at its base and up on its deck. One person stands staring down at us, her silhouette unmistakable.

Cordelia. The ship must be the *Crocodile*. What happened to it?

“What do you want to talk to me about?” I ask, dragging my stare away from the ship and walking to where Ronan stands with his back to me on the wharf side of the road.

He turns and glares at me, his eyes dark. “Stop lying to me, Alessa. Tell me exactly how you open those doors.”

I start and take a step back. “What? I’m not lying. Do you really think I wanted to leave my sister only minutes after getting her back? We’re supposed to be in Wonderland with her right now.”

“Then why are we here?” Ronan clenches his fist.

“I didn’t!” I shout. “You disappeared. I told you, Wesley said he couldn’t allow you to return. I just ... I didn’t think. I had to go after you because ... I pictured the pocket watch and the key, and a door opened. Like we tried at the manor back in London. I followed you because ... I don’t know! I was worried. But I swear to you, I did not bring us to Neverland.” I clench my fists as well and stand tall. “What reason would I have to lie to you?”

Ronan strides towards me, closing the gap between us until he’s towering over me. “What reason do you have to tell the truth? Who are you protecting? What haven’t you told me?”

I stand my ground and glare right back at him. “You have serious trust issues.”

“If you want me to trust you, then open a door to Wonderland, right now.” Ronan grabs my arm, then raises his hook.

“And what if I don’t?” I glance at the glint of sunshine bouncing off the metal. “You’ll gut me like a fish?”

“You want your sister back, don’t you?”

“Why are you even asking that question? And why do you want to go to Wonderland now? Your key is here.”

“I don’t.” Ronan works his jaw, then slowly lowers his hook. “Actually, I do. I do and I don’t. It’s complicated.” His grip on my arm hurts, but I don’t let on. I stare at him and wait. He drops his gaze, then lets go of me and steps back. “You honestly don’t know how you do it?” he asks, his voice now low and quiet.

I shake my head. “I don’t know exactly how it works, only that it does when I think of the pocket watch and the key. If I knew the details, I would tell you. Alice ... I would never leave her willingly. All I wanted was to create a doorway and pull you back. I thought you’d just be on the other side. But once it opened, it sucked Lucy and me through. All I know is that the pocket watch and the key seem to be connected, but I have no idea how it works. It just does.” I rub my arm where Ronan had hold of me.

“Did I hurt you?” Ronan reaches for me.

“It’s nothing. I’m fine.”

He takes my hand and runs his thumb over the back of it, staring at the red mark on my skin. “I’m sorry, love.”

I sigh. “So am I. I wish I could give you a solid answer. I wish I could open doors to all sorts of places. I want to get to Wonderland, too. I want to get back to Alice. But I also want to help you. Even if you are an idiot.”

Ronan’s lips quirk at one side. “I’ll ignore that remark.” He pauses and studies me for a heartbeat, then his eyes widen. “So far, opening a door has worked when you’ve been thinking about the pocket watch and the key. What if you thought about something else? Maybe all you have to do is think about something in Wonderland to get us there.”

I mimic his wide-eyed expression, excitement filling my veins with warmth. “If I think about Alice, the pocket watch can take us to Wonderland!”

“Will you try to open a door to Wonderland for me?”

“No,” I say, shaking my head and grinning. “I’ll try for us.”

NOTHING MAKES SENSE

RONAN

Alessa takes the pocket watch from beneath the folds of her gown. She runs her thumb across the face, then turns the timepiece over and flicks the back open.

“Do you think that makes a difference?” I ask. “Having it open like that?”

She shrugs. “It’s what I’ve done in the past.”

Alessa holds the pocket watch in front of her and stares at the heart shape inside the back cover, her lips set into a thin line. Her brow furrows, and her shoulders tense. I glance around for a doorway, but nothing appears. Then Alessa drops her hands and closes the watch case with a click.

“Nothing,” she says, staring up at me. “I didn’t even feel the pull like I have before.”

“Pull? What do you mean?”

She presses her hands to her chest, the timepiece clutched in her fingers. “I feel it in here.” She cocks her head to the side. “But if I hadn’t tried to open a door to Wonderland now, I wouldn’t have known I felt different in the first place.”

“Different how?”

“It’s like ... something tugs at my heart.”

“Maybe you’re trying too hard, and you do know how to open doors, but you don’t know that you know.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

“I’m from Wonderland.” I grin. “Nothing makes sense.”

“How can I know and not know at the same time?”

I tap my hook against my temple. “Maybe you’ve forgotten. Maybe the pocket watch and the key are trying to remind you, and you’re just not remembering.”

Forget.

Something shrouds my own memory, like a dark layer of mist, and a dull ache blooms in my chest. The pain isn’t as bad as it was when I first came to Neverland, but it’s still there, a throbbing hollowness in the background, a constant reminder that my mind is broken.

Alessa slips the timepiece back into her dress and folds her arms. “There’s a lot of knowing and not knowing going on here.”

Her words shake me from my reverie. “Aye, but if you have forgotten, then I know a way we might be able to help you remember. We should find out how you open the doorways. Then we can focus on getting the key back. *Then* we’ll go to Wonderland.”

Alessa opens her mouth to respond, but I’m across the street to the inn before she can. I can’t let her argue with me. If I have a plan, I can hold it together. Even if it isn’t the best plan, I can focus on something other than going mad, and it will stop me from lashing out at her again and doing something I’ll regret. When I glance back, she stares at me with a million questions in her eyes. I hold a finger up to tell her to wait.

Voices from the inn drift out when I open the door. “You lot,” I call to my crew members from the front landing. “Come along smartly. We’ve much to do.”

Wendeline scowls, downs the last of her rum, then nudges Lucy as she slides off her barstool. Curly, Smee, and Jessie join them as they follow me out to Alessa, Wendeline still scowling, and Lucy twisting her fingers nervously into her apron. Rose dives under the top hat sitting on the bar. It lifts into the air, the faerie’s legs dangling beneath it, and Rose shoots past, leaving her usual pink streak in her wake. She doubles back and sets the hat on my head, then perches on my shoulder.

I stride towards the foreshore with everyone in tow. Wendeline hangs back, but Alessa hitches her dress and speeds up to walk beside me.

“Where are we going?” she asks.

“You can swim?” I glance at her sideways.

“Well, yes.”

“Perfect. We’re going to the Lake of Memories.”

Rose leans around my chin to look at Alessa. “The lake can sometimes uncover what’s been lost. Objects, memories, time.”

“By swimming in it?”

“Yes,” I say. “You sound sceptical.”

“Rose said sometimes?” Alessa looks up at me and the faerie on my shoulder as we walk. “What do you mean, sometimes?”

I shrug. “It doesn’t always work.”

Rose flits into the air and hovers in front of Alessa. “What Ronan meant to say is, it doesn’t always work for *him*.”

Alessa worries at her bottom lip. "I'm trying to imagine how ... Do you mean? ... If I've lost something, it will show me where it is? How do you uncover time? It all seems ... rather curious."

I stop at the stairs leading onto the main wharf and face her. "Always so many questions."

"That's because there are so many things I don't understand." Alessa frowns, as though her mind is trying to work it all out and failing miserably.

I know how you feel, love.

"Come on, it's worth a try."

"I hope I'm not going to get wet for nothing," Alessa mumbles.

We step down onto the wharf, the wooden boards springy under foot. Cordelia glares at me from the fo'c'sle of the *Crocodile* as her crew scurry around on deck. I study the ship, annoyed to find the damage I caused has mostly been fixed.

"That's a big ship," Alessa says, staring at the *Crocodile*.

I snort. "You haven't seen *Vengeance* yet."

"Is it bigger?"

"She. *Vengeance* is a she, not an it. And you could say that."

"Ronan is being modest," Rose adds.

"Why is the *Crocodile* in dry dock?" Alessa asks.

"I may have put a few holes in her with my cannons." I glance at Alessa sideways, forcing back a smirk. "But it looks like she's almost ready to sail again."

"Her crew have hardly slept," Wendeline says.

I stop on the jetty and face my quartermaster. “Have you?”

She clenches her jaw. “Don’t worry about me. I’m fine.”

But you still need sleep. I study the dark patches under her eyes that she’s tried to hide with heavy eyeliner. My guess is she’s been at the inn all night. If I know her as well as I think I do, Wendeline was waiting for me. She’s almost dead on her feet. But I also know Wendeline hates it when anyone fusses over her.

“I trust all repairs have been made to *Vengeance*?” I ask.

“Aye.” Wendeline nods. “She’s as good as new.”

“Never has there been a finer ship, Captain,” Smee says.

“Wonderful.”

“If Cordelia is here, and she can’t go anywhere yet, you can get your key back,” Alessa says.

Wendeline snorts.

“It’s not that easy,” I reply, ignoring my quartermaster’s smirk. “Neverdrop is neutral territory. I can’t challenge her here. It’s against the rules. Best to regroup, then try again later.” I smile down at Alessa. “And since you can open a doorway that leads to the key, we’ll wait until she’s out of the bay, then you can take me to her.”

“You can’t board the *Crocodile*.” Wendeline plants her hands on her hips.

“I can do whatever I want,” I say, as I keep walking.

We continue on until we reach the dinghy where it bobs on the water beside the jetty. Jackson lays on the seat, probably sleeping off a big night

on the rum. I jump into the boat with a thump, and he scrambles to take up the oars.

“Captain! You’re back,” Jackson says, staring up at me with bleary eyes.

“Aye, and you look like shite.”

He chuckles, looking me up and down. “You don’t look so hot yourself.”

I hold my hand out to Alessa and she takes it so I can help her step down into the boat. I do the same for Lucy and Jessie, but Wendeline ignores my offer of assistance and climbs in herself, a scowl pulling creases into her forehead.

She can decline me all she likes, but I’ll never stop offering.

“He had an altercation with Tink,” Wendeline says.

Jackson raises his eyebrows and chuckles.

Smee and Curly jump in, take up the remaining oars, and we set off across the waters of the bay to where *Vengeance* is anchored. I study Alessa as she watches the shore of Neverdrop recede. She casts her gaze out over the bay, taking in our surroundings. When her sight falls on *Vengeance*, she gasps, and it brings a smile to my lips.

“How is that a fair fight?” She looks up at me. “The *Crocodile* is a much smaller ship.”

“Don’t worry, she can still hold her own.”

“Why does Cordelia hate you so much?” Alessa asks.

Wendeline snorts. “Peter hates him more. But the feeling’s mutual. And it’s not a story for innocent ears.”

“But it is one I will tell another time,” I say, before she can retort, throwing Wendeline a firm glance. “I’m sure Alessa can handle it.”

“I suppose, if she can handle you, she can handle anything.” Wendeline turns her back and stares out over the bay.

“Well, I already know that apparently, he’s a murderer.” Alessa frowns and chews her bottom lip.

“Not apparently,” Wendeline says without facing us again. “He *is* a murderer. Trust me when I say you should stay away from him.”

The dinghy rocks as the oars beat through the water. She’s in a particularly foul mood. I would’ve thought Wendeline would be happy to see my safe return. Most of the time, the snide comments and arguments we have are playful banter, but today, she seems far too serious for my liking.

I catch Alessa staring at me, and I quickly force a smile to my lips. She has enough to worry about without adding my annoyance with Wendeline, or our less than ideal history, to the list. Alessa returns my smile, and it makes my heart flutter. She’ll knock the pirate out of me, yet.

“*Vengeance* ahoy,” Smee shouts, startling me out of my thoughts.

“Stop yelling, Smee,” I growl.

We bring the dinghy alongside *Vengeance*. Jessie stands and grabs the rope ladder hanging down the side of the ship. “Ladies first.” She gestures to Alessa to climb up.

“Men first,” I say. “Usually I’d agree with Jessie, but the ladies need to keep their dignity. Up you go, Smee. Rose will give you a boost.”

The bo'sun scrambles onto the ladder as Rose showers him with faerie dust, his face twisted in confusion. I'm sure he'll work it out by the time he reaches the gunwale. Jackson and Curly follow after their dusting, flying up the side of the ship, using the ladder to steady themselves. Jessie secures the ropes, and I set my foot on the first rung.

Rose flits into the air, dropping her pink glitter on the rest of us. "See you at the top." She streaks up the side of *Vengeance*.

"Show off," Wendeline mumbles.

I glance back at Alessa. "You'll be all right?"

"I ... don't know how to fly." Her eyes are wide.

"You don't need to. I can assist if you want?"

"I'll catch her if she falls," Wendeline says.

Alessa wraps her arms around herself, but I don't miss her shaky fingers. She's terrified.

"The three of you go first," I say to Wendeline, Jessie, and Lucy as I step down from the ladder. "I'll turn my back, then I'll help Alessa climb."

Wendeline narrows her eyes, but she doesn't argue. She helps Lucy onto the ladder. The maid starts to climb and I turn around. Keeping my back turned, I study Alessa as she cranes her neck to watch.

"You don't seem all right," I say, now that we're alone in the dinghy. It bumps gently against the side of the ship. "If I were to take a wild guess, I'd say you're pretty damn scared."

"So what if I am?" Alessa raises her chin.

I hold up my hand. "It's not a bad thing. Facing fear makes us stronger."

Alessa rubs her arms as though she's cold. "I've never thought of myself as strong."

"You're joking, right? You're stronger than you know. How else could you cope with everything that's happened and not go mad?"

"Who says I haven't gone mad?" Alessa stares at me, and there's a hint of a smile at the corners of her mouth.

"Ah, but of course you have." I grin. "Or you wouldn't have come."

"Yes, I know. We're all mad here ..." Alessa steps up to the ladder and grasps the rope with both hands. "I just ... climb?"

"Aye, and I'll be right behind you."

She steps up a couple of rungs, then I put my arms around her, snag one side of the ladder with my hook and grasp the other with my hand. I follow Alessa, my feet two rungs below hers and my body positioned to stop her from falling. Her hair tickles my cheek, and for the first time, I catch its sweet jasmine scent. It floats around me, intoxicating. Her warmth seeps into me, and it takes all my self-control not to lean closer.

The skirt of her gown billows around us. I'll have to get her into some more practical clothing. She's about Wendeline's size, so she should have something to fit her.

Alessa slips a couple of times, and it's slow going, but we eventually make it to the top. Wendeline helps Alessa over the gunwale, and I hoist myself up after her.

"Captain on deck," Smee yells.

A loud cheer rolls through my crew, and for once, I don't tell Smee to stick his cap in it.

Alessa clutches the side of the ship until her knuckles turn white, and fear shines bright in her eyes. “It’s a long way down,” she whispers, taking a step away from the railing and stumbling into me.

I wrap my arms around her to catch her. “It’s okay, love. You’re safe now.”

She nods and untangles herself from me, stepping back to stand beside Lucy. The maid seems just as frightened as Alessa, but I would expect nothing less after what she’s been through. My crew are a good lot, but they’re also scary looking to those who don’t know them.

Jessie, Jackson, and the other deckhands busy themselves with hauling up the dinghy. The rest of the crew hang idly about, staring at the newcomers. Alessa surveys those around her while Lucy wrings her hands.

“Don’t mind them,” I say. “They’re mostly harmless.”

Wendeline scoffs, but she keeps her mouth shut.

The door leading to my cabin bursts open. Rose flits out, followed by my second coat and a dry shirt, suspended by her glittering faerie dust.

“Dry clothes, Captain,” the faerie says.

“Thank you.” I toss her my top hat, shrug out of my damp coat, then tug my shirt over my head.

My eyes meet Alessa’s. A blush creeps into her cheeks, and she hastily drops her gaze to her feet. I force the smile from my lips, not wanting to make her feel any more uncomfortable than she already is, then pull my clean shirt on and don my fresh coat.

“All right, love?” I whisper in her ear.

She nods, but doesn't speak. I can only imagine how improper she thinks I am to partially undress on the main deck. I'd be lying if I said her obvious discomfort didn't thrill me.

I put my hand on the small of Alessa's back to guide her towards the steps leading to the quarterdeck. Lucy follows, and I take both girls up to the helm. Nibs salutes, tipping his fingers to his brow. Wendeline stomps behind us and takes her usual position at the side railing. A deep frown still mars her face, harshening her beautiful features.

"I do wish you would smile more," I say.

She responds with a glare before looking away.

I survey the main deck, and it seems my crew is still besotted with our new guests. Most of them are loitering on the main deck, trying to get a good look at Alessa and Lucy.

"You'd think none of them had seen a girl before," Wendeline says.

"But your crew has girls," Alessa replies.

"None as pretty as you." I glance down at her, and this time her mouth curls up.

Wendeline stabs me with another glare. "I'll be on deck."

"She's in a mood," Nibs says, staring at her back as she takes off down the steps.

I sigh and run my hand through my hair. "You ready to move?" I ask the helmsman.

"Aye, aye, Captain."

Worrying about Wendeline will have to wait. She can take care of herself, anyway. And she'll get over whatever is bothering her. She always

does.

I step up to the railing that looks over the main deck. “Weigh anchor and hoist the mizen!” I yell.

The crew flies into a frenzy. The capstan grinds and the sails unfurl. They catch the wind, and Nibs guides *Vengeance* towards the mouth of the bay. The sun throws its rays through the clouds, turning them shades of pink and orange. The water sparkles, and Alessa looks on with her mouth slightly open and her eyes wide.

She cranes her neck and looks to the sky. “It’s like sunset in the middle of the day.”

I stand close to her so our shoulders touch. “The daylight sky always looks this way in Neverland.”

“It’s beautiful,” she whispers.

The wonder on her face makes me glad that we’re here, even though Neverland was never where I wanted to be. It seems with Alessa, I don’t care where I am, as long as I’m with her.

“Where to, Captain?” Nibs asks, breaking my reverie.

Vengeance emerges from the bay into the waters of the Neversea.

“Head for Wonderheart,” I say. “We’ll anchor off the beach from Pixie Channel.”

“To the lighthouse,” Nibs calls, spinning the helm to bring us around.

The crew busy themselves with various tasks, and I return my attention to Alessa. Her eyes are still wide as she watches everything happening on the main deck.

She looks at me. “Lighthouse? Where your hat is?”

“Aye, you remember,” I say, smiling. “The lighthouse powers and protects Neverland.”

“I can’t wait to see it.” Alessa stares ahead again.

“We can go faster if you like.”

She chuckles. “Can you control the wind?”

I smirk, then lean over the railing and yell, “Rose!”

Moments later, my ship faerie emerges from my cabin and streaks up to the quarterdeck, her little arms folded over her chest. “You called?”

“Be a good lass and fill the sails.” I offer her my brightest smile.

She shakes her head. “Seriously, is blowing for you all I’m good for?”

I raise one eyebrow. “Well, you are full of hot air.”

Rose scowls, but she obeys my request and flits off towards the mainsail.

“What’s she doing?” Alessa asks.

“Giving *Vengeance* a boost,” I say. “You better hang on.”

A LITTLE OVERWHELMING

ALESSA

I crane my neck as Rose flies up to the mainsail and hovers near the crow's nest. Curly tips his fingers to his brow, then loops his hands through the shroud and peers down at us on the quarterdeck. My shoulder brushes Ronan's. From the corner of my eye, I catch him watching me, but I keep my focus on Rose.

Her tiny wings beat gently in the air as pink glitter showers down around her. Rose raises her hands, leans forward, then a cloud of faerie dust swirls from her fingers. It hits the sail and ripples over it, coating it in a sparkling blanket.

The ship surges forward. The prow rises, then falls sharply, and a jolt runs through *Vengeance* strong enough to jostle my footing. Ronan puts his hook arm behind me as I grip the railing.

"Keep her on the water," Ronan yells up to Rose.

I drag my gaze away from the faerie and turn to look at him. "Can she make us fly?"

"Aye." Ronan's arm presses into my back. "But I don't like to let my ship leave the water."

"A flying ship would be amazing."

He raises one eyebrow. "You seemed to have trouble with being up so high before."

“That’s because I was required to climb a thin rope ladder with nothing but air under my feet.” I scan the main deck. “But *Vengeance* is a big ship.”

“Which is precisely why I don’t let her leave the water.” Ronan’s brow creases. “If she were to fall ... Let’s just say I’ve already lost one ship spectacularly.”

Nibs chuckles behind us. “That’s an understatement.”

“Nothing Ronan ever does is understated,” Wendeline says from the stairs. She stops with her boot on the top step and fixes her stare on Ronan. “Now we’re underway, can I have a word?”

Before Ronan can answer, a pink streak darts past us, and I look at Wendeline through a glittery haze. She scowls. Rose appears in front of me, her tissue paper-thin wings beating behind her. She tilts her little head to the side, then darts around me. I twist to see where she went, and find her perched on Ronan’s right shoulder.

“As I was saying—”

“What’s on your mind, Wendie?” Ronan asks.

Wendeline’s gaze flicks to me, her lips pinched, then she stares at her captain again. “I would like to speak with you in private.”

Ronan rubs his cheek with his hand, his other arm still behind my back. “Whatever it is you want to say, you can say it here.”

“It’s all right.” I manoeuvre out of Ronan’s embrace and step back. “Lucy and I can go down to the main deck.”

“I’ve never been on a ship before.” Lucy steps over from where she was standing at the side railing. “And maybe there’s somewhere Miss

Alessa could freshen up?”

I smile at my maid, then reach out my hand to her. She slips her fingers into mine and I give them a gentle squeeze. I’ll have to tell her to stop acting as my servant. All I want right now is a friend.

Ronan glances down to the main deck. He cups his hand around his mouth and shouts, “Jessie!”

The pirate girl appears from behind a barrel, hurries to stand at the base of the quarterdeck, and stares up at us.

“Approach,” Wendeline says.

Jessie climbs the steps onto the quarterdeck. “Captain?”

Ronan faces the young pirate girl. “Rose is going to give Alessa and Lucy a tour—”

“I am?” Rose interjects, launching off his shoulder.

“Yes, you are.” Ronan narrows his gaze at her, then looks at Jessie again. “Please accompany them, then take the ladies to my cabin to freshen up. Perhaps you could find them some more appropriate attire?”

“Aye, Captain.” Jessie nods.

“Well, come on then.” Rose darts down the steps.

Jessie stands aside and gestures for Lucy and me to follow the faerie. I hitch the skirt of my gown with one hand, grab the handrail with the other, then step down onto the main deck.

The crew is busy manning the ropes and attending to other tasks. They move about in every direction, and *Vengeance* lolls over the waves as the ship powers through the water. I go to the gunwale and look out over the sea. The coast of Neverland glides past, and I pinch the skin on the

underside of my wrist to make sure I'm not dreaming. The sun warms my face as I look to the sky, amazed again by the shifting oranges, yellows, and pinks behind the clouds.

When I look down at the water, a surge of dizziness hits me, rolling from my head to my stomach. We're so high up. My fingers ache, and I unclench them from the side of the ship to take a step back.

"Are you all right, Miss Alessa?" Lucy takes my elbow.

"Yes, I'm fine." I force a smile. "This is all a little overwhelming," I add in a whisper.

Lucy leans closer. "I keep pinching myself."

I giggle. "I just did exactly that."

Rose flies in a circle around us. Her wings beat so fast they become a blur. I hold up my hand, and she alights on my palm for a moment before taking to the air again. I glance up at Ronan, but he's in the middle of a heated conversation with Wendeline. His brow is pinched and his jaw clenched. He obviously doesn't like what she's saying. She blanches, taking a step back, then digs into a pocket in her coat and hands something to him.

"There's not much to see." Rose circles us again, and I refocus on her. "Deck, sails, rigging. It's all rather boring if you ask me. The only time anything exciting happens is when Ronan is chasing Cordelia and he lets a few cannons fly."

Jessie chuckles. "She's not wrong."

"Are you going to introduce me properly?" someone says.

Jessie steps aside, and the boy from the dinghy grins at me. His black hair flops over one eye, and he stands with his hand on the hilt of his cutlass. His gaze moves from me to Lucy, and his lips part, as though he's thinking about eating her for dessert.

"Stop gawking." Jessie shoulders him and he stumbles sideways. "This is my idiot twin brother, Jackson."

He shoves Jessie back, harder. "Pleased to make your acquaintance." He twirls his hand and dips into a deep bow.

Lucy giggles beside me, a blush rising into her cheeks. Rose flits over and sits on Jackson's shoulder, cupping her little hand around her mouth to whisper something in his ear.

Jackson raises his eyebrows. "You don't say?"

Rose nods, then whispers something else.

"Sounds like an awfully good adventure," Jackson says, grinning.

"Ignore them." Jessie rolls her eyes. "Come on. Looks like Rose is finished with her tour. I'll find you two some clothes. You can wait in Captain Hook's quarters and I'll be back smartly."

Lucy and I follow Jessie to a door directly below the helm. Ronan smiles down at me as we pass through into a simple room, furnished with a bed, table, and four chairs. A carpet bag sits on the bed and old books line a shelf above it. Several maps and a compass sit on the table, and a top hat hangs from a row of hooks on the wall.

I take in the rest of the space, searching for clues that might tell me something about Ronan that I don't already know. A dagger with a jewel encrusted hilt hangs from a belt beside the top hat, but it's the shelf in the corner beside it that draws my eye. On it sits a fine China teacup and

saucer, decorated with tiny red roses, only the cup is broken in half. Why would Ronan keep a broken teacup? I run my finger around the edge. On the saucer sits a small heart-shaped lapel pin.

“It’s not nice to snoop,” Rose says, buzzing past.

I step back and twist my fingers together. “I wasn’t ...”

But I stop, because really, I was. The hat, the teacup, and the heart pin all remind me of Wonderland, and as much as I’ve come to like Ronan the pirate, I hope the Hatter is still in there as well.

Jessie returns with a bundle of clothing in her arms. “These should do.”

“Thank you,” I say. “Lucy and I are most grateful.”

“You can join Captain Hook on the quarterdeck once you’re ready. Come on, Rose,” Jessie says. “Leave them be.”

Rose huffs but flits over and sits on Jessie’s shoulder. The pirate girl pulls the door closed behind her, and I let out a long breath. Lucy hurries to the clothing and sorts through it, crinkling her nose. I slip into a chair and watch her.

“This isn’t proper,” Lucy mumbles, holding up a pair of trousers.

“We’re not in London anymore.” I get to my feet again. “And no one here seems to be concerned with being proper.”

Lucy looks at me with wide eyes, then her mouth turns up into a smile and she laughs. “We really are out of our comfort zone, aren’t we?”

“You could say that.”

“But I don’t think I can wear these.” She stares at the trousers. “They look uncomfortable.”

I go to the bed and search through the clothing. As well as the trousers, there are stockings, linen shirts, under bust corsets, and a coat each. I agree with Lucy. Wearing trousers is not something I want to have to get used to, but there's no way I can continue getting around in such a huge gown.

I glance around the cabin, my gaze falling on the dagger hanging in the corner. It's large for a knife, more like a small sword. I take it down, remove it from the sheath, and look at my dress. If I cut away the bottom tiers, it will be short enough to move around in, but still long enough to cover my modesty.

"Will you help me?" I hold the dagger out to Lucy.

She takes the weapon. "You want me to cut your dress?"

"Since neither of us wants to wear trousers, it seems to be the only option."

Lucy takes a breath, grabs my skirts, then pushes the tip of the dagger through the fabric. She cuts and tears the bottom half of my dress away easily, the blade of the dagger sharp. I also remove my underskirt, then pull on a pair of the stockings. Although my skirt reaches my knees, and my legs are covered, I've never worn something so short. I feel practically naked. We shorten Lucy's dress as well, then don the coats. Lucy tears a strip from the discarded fabric of my dress, braids it into my hair, then uses the end to secure the plait.

I eye the dagger lying on the table, then run my finger over its hilt. It hums beneath my touch. So far, no harm has come to us in Neverland, but it would be nice to have the means to protect myself, and Lucy, if I need to.

Not that I know how to use such a weapon.

Still, I'd like to ask Ronan to teach me, so I slip the blade back into the sheath, then clutch the weapon with shaky fingers. I've not stopped to process much of what has happened. Running away from Father, losing Alice, ending up in a world with pirates and faeries and magic. I grip the dagger more tightly to still my hands.

"Is everything all right, Miss Alessa?" Lucy asks.

"Yes, of course," I reply instantly, not wanting her to worry. "I'm concerned about you, though," I continue, to take her focus off me. "You've been very quiet. And you got such a fright when Ronan first arrived. I tried to convince you that you didn't see what you saw, but there's no fooling you now. This must be hard for you."

She squeezes my arm. "Don't worry about me. I'll be fine. We need to concentrate on making the best out of the situation, and finding our way back to Miss Alice. We can worry about everything else after that."

I nod and give her a hug. "Thank you ... for being here. And for being my friend."

"Always." She returns my embrace. "But I must say, it is a shame Master Ronan isn't actually courting you. Is he?"

I chuckle. "No, he isn't."

We break apart, and I take a deep breath.

Lucy smiles. "Maybe ..."

I smile back. "Maybe ..."

The dagger thrums in my hands as I walk to the door, and Lucy follows me outside.

“Prepare to come about,” Ronan yells.

I look up as *Vengeance* passes a small island. A lighthouse sits close to the cliff, but it’s unlike any lighthouse I’ve seen before. Shaped like a pawn from a chess game, the sphere at the top is made entirely of glass. Inside, the lantern turns, but the beam is invisible under the sunshine. The black shape spins as though suspended by nothing but air. The odd-looking building is black and white like a chessboard, and the watch room windows are shaped like hearts.

When I move my gaze to the quarterdeck, Wendeline is gone. Ronan smiles down at me, his eyes roving over me from head to toe. He raises one eyebrow in question. I turn to Lucy, but she’s deep in conversation with Jackson, so I leave her and join Ronan on the quarterdeck, the climb up the steps much easier now my dress is half its previous length and weight.

“Jessie couldn’t find your trousers?” Ronan asks.

“A lady doesn’t wear trousers.”

“Don’t let Wendeline hear you say that.” He folds his arms over his chest and leans his shoulder against the mast, his gaze travelling to my hands. “I see you had a good look around my quarters.”

“I didn’t mean to snoop,” I say, standing taller and raising my chin. “It’s just ... I’d like to be able to protect myself.”

“I can protect you, love.”

“Yes, but maybe ... you could teach me how to use this?” I hold the dagger out to him. “Just in case.”

Ronan studies me, and my heart skips as his dark gaze rests on me. I chew my bottom lip and wait for his reply.

“You won’t wear trousers, but you’ll use a sword?” he finally says.

I glance down at my hands. “I thought it was a large dagger.”

“Size doesn’t matter, love.” Ronan grins. “It’s how you wield the weapon that counts.”

Heat blooms in my cheeks, but I force myself to look at him again. “Then you’ll teach me?”

“There’s not much to learn, really.” Ronan pushes off the mast and comes to me. “Point it at your attacker and stab them if they come too close. The best lessons are learned from experience.”

“Well, unless that experience is death,” I say.

Ronan chuckles. “I won’t let it come to that.” He takes the dagger from my grasp, slipping the belt around my waist and fastening it. “You may keep it on you. I want to take it back to Wonderland, anyway.”

“It’s from Wonderland?”

“A few things in Neverland are.”

“Dead Man Passage ahead,” Curly calls from the crow’s nest.

Ronan moves to the edge of the quarterdeck. “Drop anchor,” he yells.

Nibs spins the helm, the main deck erupts with movement, the capstan grinds, and I look on in amazement as Ronan’s small crew man *Vengeance* like a well-oiled machine. Soon, we’re anchored off the coast of the island with the water lapping gently at the ship’s hull. A bird caws somewhere in the distance, and it sounds like it’s crying, *never, never*.

Ronan turns to me and holds out his hand. “Are you ready?”

I force a smile and step forward, slipping my fingers into his warm grasp.

“Yes,” I say, even though fear has tied my stomach in knots.

Immediately, I want to take it back. To tell him no, that I haven’t been ready for any of the crazy things that have happened since he literally fell into my life. But instead, I stare into his eyes, take a deep breath, and let him lead me towards the stairs.

I’ve come this far and haven’t gone mad, but I’ll do whatever it takes to get back to Alice, even if it means losing more than my mind.

TWISTED IDEA OF FUN

RONAN

The deckhands scurry around, untying ropes to prepare the dinghy for launch.

“Avast!” I yell, letting go of Alessa’s hand. “We won’t be needing the dinghy.”

Wendeline steps towards me. “You’ll need someone to take you ashore.”

“You’re staying here.”

“The hell I am.” She clenches her fists. “If you insist on pursuing this madness, at least take me with you.”

I glare at her. “I am your captain, and I say you stay here. You have the ship while I’m gone.”

Wendeline retreats and leans against the gunwale, her arms folded across her chest, and her lips puckered in a scowl. She may look angry, but the fear in her eyes betrays her.

I know she doesn’t want me to leave Neverland. To leave her. I’m not an idiot. But it’s not as though she didn’t know what she was taking on when we formed the crew on *Vengeance*. She knows I do what I want, when I want. And she’s known all along that what I want most is to get my key and find a way back to Wonderland.

When I told her about Alessa and the doorways, she served up quite a few pieces of her mind while Alessa and Lucy were off the quarterdeck.

Even more so when I made her hand over her mershell.

I gave it back to her tenfold.

I'm Captain Hook, and I won't let Wendeline, or anyone else, stand in my way.

"I'll need your faerie dust." I step towards my quartermaster with my hand out.

Wendeline's mouth opens, as though she's about to protest like she did with the mershell, then she snaps it shut again. Her expression returns to the scowl she's worn ever since I came back from London.

She flips her coat aside and removes a small pouch from her belt. "You can explain to Tiger Lily why both of us will need a refill."

I take the pouch and weigh it in my palm. "You worry about *Vengeance*, and let me worry about the faeries. Alessa and I journey to the lake alone. And when we return, we get back my key."

The crew cheer and hoot. Wendeline shakes her head, pushes off the railing, then shoulders past me in the direction of her cabin. Someone puts a hand on my arm, and I turn to face Alessa. There was a time when she wouldn't have dreamed of touching me, and to think she feels comfortable enough to forgo etiquette now makes my heart beat like a moth's wings.

"Ronan?" She looks up at me with wide eyes. "Are we ...? Are you ...? How will we get to the lake?" Her gaze shifts to the pouch of faerie dust resting on my palm.

Damn! It seems I *am* an idiot.

Rose launches from Jessie's shoulder. "He's going to fly you there."

More cheers and hoots flow through my crew. I spin and glare at them until the crowd disperses and I'm left with Alessa and Lucy. Rose alights on the gunwale, plops onto her bottom and sits with her legs crossed. Lucy's eyes are also wide. She glances towards the island and the expanse of water between the coast and the ship.

"Fly?" The question puffs from Lucy's mouth.

"Alessa will be safe, I promise," I say, using the tip of my hook to prise the pouch open. "I won't let her fall. The faerie dust won't let her fall."

Alessa draws in a breath, purses her lips, and nods. "Very well." She turns to Lucy. "Will you be all right?"

"I'll be fine, Miss Alessa, but will you?"

"I'm sure I will." She fixes her stare back on me.

"I won't let anything happen to you, love."

Lucy scans my crew members, and I catch Jackson looking at her. He has a playful smile on his lips, and his eyes shine like stars. Of all the Lost Boys who joined me, he's the most likeable. He has a boyish charm that draws people to him, and it seems Lucy hasn't avoided his pull.

"Jackson," I call. "Behave."

His smile drops away, and he turns to inspect the rigging. I don't miss the blush rising into Lucy's cheeks.

"I'll make sure everyone stays in line," Rose says. "Even Wendie."

"Good luck with that," I mumble.

Alessa wrings her hands, and I wish I had both of mine so I can reach out and still her nerves. But the one hand I do have is holding the faerie

dust. Rose notices my struggle. She flies over and takes it from me, tying it to my belt beside my empty pouch. She offers me a smile before flitting to Lucy, grabbing her hand, and pulling her away to join the rest of the crew.

I dip my fingers into the pouch, then sprinkle some dust onto myself. Alessa comes closer, and I do the same to her, making sure I give her a little more for her first flight. The orange, glittery dust coats both of us. Tiger Lily's signature colour, and the most potent faerie dust in Neverland.

Flying requires a clear mind, and over time, I've become accustomed to emptying my head of negative thoughts, as hard as it is sometimes. But Alessa is scared, which means the faerie dust won't work in the same way. I pull the strings to close the pouch, then check it's secure on my belt.

"Negative thoughts will weigh you down." I run my fingers over Alessa's cheek, leaving a faint orange streak behind. "Focus on something happy, and you'll soar."

She shivers under my touch. Then I take her hand and kick off the deck of the ship. Clumsily, she follows, her fingers clutching mine like a vice. We float out over the water. Alessa's legs scramble in the air. She screams and hangs on my hand, her other arm pinwheeling. I pull her towards me, wrapping my hook arm around her until we're dancing in the air. Her breaths come shallow and fast, and she squeezes her eyes closed.

"You're all right, love," I whisper, pressing my cheek to hers. "I've got you."

"Ronan, I'm scared," she says, her voice barely there.

I let go of her hand and wrap both my arms around her as we fly towards the beach. Alessa doesn't open her eyes, even when we touch

down on the sand. She clings to me, her fingers digging into my arms.

“Alessa,” I say, my lips only an inch from hers.

She slowly opens her eyes. Her lips tremble as she draws in air, then her breath tickles my chin.

I want to kiss her.

My heart hammers, pounding against my ribcage so fast I fear it will burst from my chest. I close the small space between us, and our lips brush.

“Ronan ...” Alessa stiffens in my arms.

I pull away. What was I thinking?

“The lake is a bit of a walk from here.” I release her and take a step back. “There’s a path across the plains, but flying would be much faster.”

Alessa hugs herself. She turns her back to the sea and surveys the land in front of us. A breeze off the water whips a strand of hair around her face, and she reaches up to tuck it behind her ear. When she looks at me, her expression betrays her fear, but I see something else in her eyes. Disappointment?

I want to go back to a few moments ago. To go through with that kiss. To know if she would have kissed me back.

What is she doing to me? What I’m feeling for this girl is more maddening than all the madness in Wonderland. After I ended up in Neverland, I promised myself I would never get attached to anyone. So far, I’ve succeeded. Wendeline is a testament to that. But will Alessa make me break that promise?

“We should be okay on foot in daylight hours,” I continue.

Alessa scans the plains in front of us. "Should be?"

"The wolves usually hunt at night. And as long as the bison don't stampede."

Alessa shifts her gaze back to me, her eyes wide. "I suppose you have lions, and tigers, and bears as well?"

"We do. Neverland is home to many animals," I say. "If we fly, the worst we'll have to contend with is the Neverbird, but she's probably floating around on the sea in one of my hats."

"A bird in a hat?" Alessa's lips curve up.

"It's not the craziest thing I've seen, believe me."

Alessa chuckles. "Of course not, you're the Hatter. Crazy is your middle name."

"Actually, it's Kingston." I grin, happy that Alessa is at least smiling again, and not looking at me with her eyes full of fear. "Are you up to giving flying another go?"

Alessa draws in a deep breath. "Well, I guess it sounds safer ... maybe?"

"I promise you won't fall." I offer her my hand. "I won't let you."

She hesitates, then slips her fingers into mine. We kick off the ground, but this time I don't fly as high as we did when we left *Vengeance*. Alessa wobbles, holding her free arm out to steady herself. Her mouth opens in a silent scream. I surge forward, forcing her to move horizontally through the air. Then I tug her arm until we're shoulder to shoulder.

The island passes beneath us. A herd of bison graze on the grasses, while starlings forage for bugs on the beasts' backs. The Lake of

Memories comes into view, edged with several majestic weeping willows. Their branches cry crystal drops, and feed the lake to support its task of uncovering memories.

“Relax,” I say over the air rushing past. “I’ve got you.”

Alessa grips my hand tightly. “I’m terrified!”

I reach my hook arm across Alessa’s chest, then flip onto my back and manoeuvre my body under hers until I’m flying upside down.

“This position is most improper,” she says.

“Come on, love, I think we’re past that. Don’t you?” I raise my eyebrow, then float up until there’s only an inch between our bodies. “Or would you prefer me on top?” I grab her waist and spin us. Alessa screams, and the sound gets carried away by the wind. Her grip on me falters. She falls, but I spin us again so she’s back above me. Her hair flies loose from her braid and trails out behind her. “You’re not thinking happy thoughts.”

“Right now, I’m thinking I want to smack you!” Alessa puts her hands on my chest and pushes me down.

I release my hold on her and drop away, leaving her flying without my support. She screams again, her arms flailing as she falls towards me. I laugh, and as she crashes into me, I wrap my arms around her, twist us until we’re vertical, then drop gently until our feet touch the ground.

Alessa whacks me on the chest, then stumbles back, breathing hard. “That was mean!”

“Aye, but it was fun.” I grin.

“Fun!” Alessa storms towards me. She shoves me hard enough to force me backwards. “You have a twisted idea of what’s fun.” She pushes me again, her eyes bright with tears. “I’ve lost my sister, and all you want to do is mess around! You scared me half to death. You’re supposed to be helping me, but all you care about is yourself. Argh. Ronan, you’re ... you’re ...” Alessa balls her fists. “Infuriating!”

I hold her glare for a moment, then stare at my hook, digging the tip into the end of my thumb. “You were perfectly safe.”

“I didn’t feel safe.”

“You’re fine now.”

“Am I? Because I feel as though I’m about to break, Ronan.”

I look at Alessa again. A tear spills onto her cheek. I want to brush it away. To pull her into my arms and tell her I’m sorry, but what good will that do? She’s angry, but so am I. She wouldn’t have gotten so scared if she trusted me.

“The lake is this way.” I head into the grove of trees that lie on the western side of the lake.

“That’s it?” Alessa’s footsteps sound behind me. “No apology?”

I spin to face her, throwing a glare back at her that makes her stop in her tracks. “What do you require an apology for, love?” I snap. “Losing Alice? Not my fault. Bringing you here? Again, not my fault. Being myself? Well, we can’t have that now, can we?”

“Not when being yourself puts someone’s life in danger,” Alessa yells.

“You were never in danger.” I clench my teeth. “Do you want me to say sorry for scaring you? Because that’s not going to happen either. You need

thicker skin, Alessa. Especially if you plan to spend any time in Wonderland. I just did you a favour.”

Alessa purses her lips, raises her chin, then barges past me into the trees.

Good work, Ronan, you git.

“Alessa,” I call, striding after her.

She ignores me, stomping through the undergrowth with her fists clenched and her head down. I catch up to her and grab her arm. She struggles to pull herself free of my grasp, but I hold tight and draw her to me.

“You’re going the wrong way,” I say.

Alessa huffs. She relaxes and lets me hold her, but she won’t meet my gaze, staring instead at a spot on the ground to my left. Gently, I raise her chin with my hook, and she finally looks into my eyes.

“You’re right, I’m infuriating. I knew you were scared, and ... I acted like a complete ass. I am supposed to be helping you, but you’re supposed to be helping me, too.” I pause to give her the chance to respond, but she stays quiet. “I wouldn’t have done what I did if I didn’t think you were completely safe.”

The seconds tick by as I wait for Alessa to say something. When she doesn’t, I release her and take a step back. She draws in a deep breath, then lets it out slowly.

“I suppose that’s the best apology I’m going to get,” she finally says.

I run my hand through my hair. “I’m a pirate. I can’t change who I am.”

“You weren’t always a pirate. But I would never ask you to change.” She pauses, sucking her bottom lip between her teeth. “Still, I can’t control what scares me.”

“But you can control your fear.” I step towards Alessa again. “I do it every second of every day. Now, I think it’s about time for that swim.”

BENEATH THE SURFACE

ALESSA

Ronan leads me along a path through the trees. My pulse is racing from the fright he gave me, and from the anger I felt afterwards. How could he go from almost kissing me on the beach, to scaring me like that? Did he do it because I stopped him? Or because he knew I was afraid and he wanted a reaction? Is he going to behave this way every time we face something he knows scares me?

His idea of fun is twisted.

But then, his whole life has been twisted in ways I can't imagine.

He's from Wonderland.

He's spent however long in Neverland.

Maybe he's right when he said he's done me a favour. If I want to be able to face what's coming, I need to be tougher. I need to be able to control my fear. Although I don't think I overreacted with my anger towards him, maybe I need to try to understand him better before I condemn him. Maybe if I had trusted him while we were flying, my fear would not have overtaken me so much.

And that almost kiss ... Why did I stop him?

I touch my mouth, recalling the moment his lips brushed mine before I said his name. My chest tightens painfully, as though I'm mourning a loss.

What is wrong with you, Alessa?

I glance at Ronan's profile as we walk, wishing I could find the words to explain what's tumbling around in my mind. I'm so confused by Ronan and all his contradictions, but I smile when a memory of Alice pops into my head. The first time she encountered the Hatter, she found him to be quite rude, and she never thought she would ever go to another of his tea parties.

Ronan seems to be the kind of person who grows on you. Whether that growth is a barnacle or a rose, I'm yet to figure out. He has been a mixture of cocky, rude, confusing, charming, alluring, and so much more since I met him. I'm certain I won't stay angry at him for long. Until he does something else to send me over the edge.

We emerge into a clearing beside the riverbank and my breath catches. The landscape in front of us is nothing short of beautiful, and there are not enough words to describe how much so.

The sun hangs low in the sky, a half circle behind the mountains in the distance. Under its rays, the surface of the lake sparkles like a rainbow of precious gems. The trees that line the bank look as though they are covered with diamond encrusted leaves. I step down to the shore and stand beside one of the weeping willows, then reach up to touch its leaves with my fingertips. Crystals drop from the tree into the water.

"The trees sustain the lake and all the memories it has the potential to remember," Ronan says, coming to my side.

I crouch and dip my fingers into the water. "Potential? I don't understand."

"I originally made the lake to uncover something I've forgotten. The lake can take your memories and show them to you, even if you can't show

them to yourself. But it's not foolproof. It doesn't always show you what you're looking for." Ronan stares at me, a sad smile on his lips.

"Did it work?" Alessa asks. "Did you get your answer?"

Ronan presses his lips together and shakes his head. "No. But I'm still hopeful." He looks out over the water. "We'll need to go deep. Out to the middle. The depths are where the magic is most potent."

I straighten and smooth my hands down the front of my altered gown, following Ronan's gaze out over the lake. A waterfall tumbles down a cliff face on the far side, creating foaming ripples on the surface of the water.

"How did you create something so beautiful?" I whisper.

Ronan presses his shoulder lightly to mine. "I grew up in Wonderland. Anything is possible when you put your heart into it. Even someone like me creating something like this." His gaze floats back to me. "But I know of more beautiful things."

I drop my eyes, worrying at my bottom lip. Despite Ronan's roundabout compliment, I press my hands to my fluttering stomach. The lake may be beautiful, but beauty often hides terrible things beneath the surface.

"I'm scared." I look up at Ronan again.

"No need to be. I'll be right here with you."

He retreats from the water's edge a few paces and strips off his jacket. Then he kicks off his boots, removes his belt, and pulls the tie on his pants.

"What are you doing?" I ask, heat rising into my cheeks.

Ronan grins. "We can't swim with our clothes on."

He drops his pants to his ankles. I let out a small cry and turn away, covering my mouth with shaky fingers. Ronan chuckles, obviously enjoying my discomfort, then steps back to the water's edge and faces me, wearing nothing but a pair of linen drawers. My face burns, and I'm horrified at myself because I take far too long to look away.

Ronan laughs again, then walks backwards into the water. "Time to dive in. I promise I won't look while you undress."

"I should certainly hope not." I glare at him.

His shoulders shake with laughter, but he drops into the water up to his neck, then turns his back and swims away from the shore. I grip the lapels of my coat and stare at his mussed-up mop of hair, hesitating before letting the garment fall to the ground at my feet. He could turn and gawk at me at any moment, so I quickly remove my belt, boots, and clothing until I'm down to my chemise and drawers.

"How are you going, love?" Ronan doesn't turn around, staying true to his promise.

"I'm coming." I step into the water, expecting it to be frigid, but warmth engulfs me as I submerge myself. Carefully, I walk along the bottom, but stop when it falls away. "Ronan," I say, and he faces me. "I ... I'm not a strong swimmer."

He comes towards me, the water rippling around him as he moves through it. "You'll need to put your head under for the lake to read you. We won't be able to stand in the depths, but I'll hold your hand if you like?"

I nod, reaching for him. He slips his fingers between mine, then pulls me towards him. My feet scrabble for purchase on the silty bottom, and I

flail my free arm, splashing water around us.

“It’s all right. I’ve got you.” Ronan’s other arm snakes around me.

He keeps me afloat. I stop flailing and rest my hand on his shoulder, barely an inch between us. His bare skin is warm beneath my touch, and I resist the urge to run my fingers over the contours of his chest. They are hidden below the surface of the water now, but the image of him standing practically naked on the shore is seared into my brain, and it stirs something deep in my belly.

Our faces are inches apart, and I can’t help staring at his mouth. His lips are turned up in his cocky half-smile, and when I look into his eyes, they sparkle like the water around us. My heart hammers against my ribs, and my breath catches.

I want him to kiss me. To close the tiny gap between us, because it seems so big, and more painful not to. But I’ve never kissed a man before, and certainly not one like Ronan. His gaze devours me. Heat fills me from head to toe, as though I’m burning from the inside out.

“Are you ready, love?” he asks, his hair tickling my forehead.

I part my lips to reply, but no sound will come out. My head spins and I close my eyes for a moment, then Ronan’s mouth is on mine. His lips move gently, as though he’s asking if it’s all right. As though he’s expecting me to push him away. I thought he would be rough, but his touch is soft. He seems to hold back, and I cling to him in the water, wishing he wouldn’t. I twist the fingers of my free hand into his hair. His grip on my other hand tightens. Our bodies press together in the water, and he deepens the kiss, parting my lips with his tongue.

Then Ronan pulls back, leaving me panting and wanting more.

He rests his forehead on mine. “We really should ...”

I nod, untangling my fingers from his hair. We don’t speak as Ronan keeps hold of my hand and swims us out to the middle of the lake. I’m not sure I could form words, anyway. I’ve never done something so improper before in my life, and I don’t know what to say.

Ronan stops swimming and floats me back into his embrace. “Take a deep breath, then when you’re under, think about doorways and creating them.” He treads water, keeping me afloat. “Tell the lake what you need to remember. Nerida will guide you, but don’t panic, she won’t hurt you. She’s the Mermaid of the Lake.”

I nod again, because words still won’t come out of my mouth. We take a deep breath together, then Ronan pulls me down into the depths. My chest tightens, I kick my legs, and I struggle not to breathe. Then Ronan squeezes my hand, drawing my attention to him. He holds my stare through the dim water, and I settle, allowing the lake to hold me in her embrace.

Calm washes over me, as though the lake is caressing my skin and lulling me into submission. Fractured rays of light penetrate the depths, and my hair floats in waves around my shoulders. A face appears in the dimness, coming slowly into focus as it gets nearer.

The mermaid blends with the water, as though she is made of the lake and the lake is made of her. She smiles, light shimmering off the scales on her cheeks and jawline, then she reaches out and touches my face.

She does the same to Ronan, and a bubble forms around his mouth and nose. I suck in a breath as the bubble encasing my face dances in my peripheral vision.

Images appear all around me, flashing randomly from one scene to another in quick succession. Alice. Me. Us together during some of the happiest moments of my life so far. Sitting in her room, while she told me tales from Wonderland and drew pictures of its many inhabitants. Walking in the gardens of Hargreave Manor, talking about Wonderland.

Always Wonderland.

I lock my stare onto Ronan again. Can he see my memories? Is the lake showing him what I see? Am I baring my soul to him? He smiles, then mouths, *doorways*. I remember what he said.

Think about creating doorways.

Ask the lake what I need to remember.

I clutch Ronan's hand while moving my other arm through the water so I can turn to look into the darkness that lies beyond us. Nerida has faded but is still there, floating around us as though she is cradling us in the currents of the lake. She nods at me again.

How do I open doorways? Show me what I've forgotten.

More images—memories—flash around me, moving so quickly I can't keep up with them. My heart races as I catch snippets of Father yelling at Alice when I was too young to understand why he was so angry. Alice being scolded about Wonderland. Alice crying into her pillow when she didn't think I was watching. Alice being taken away from me.

Then Wesley appears. His smiling face fills my vision until I can't see anything else. He's exactly like he was when I saw him last, right before we jumped into his rabbit hole. His face is smooth, apart from the smile creases around his eyes.

Why am I remembering Wesley? I had never met him before Ronan fell into my life. And this isn't a memory of one of Alice's drawings, because she never showed me any of him. This is the real Wesley. He seems so happy. His eyes filled with kindness and love.

Dizziness washes through me, and it's as though I'm being lifted. Wesley moves to the side of my vision. There's a phantom feeling of arms around me, and I squeeze Ronan's hand to keep myself grounded. Is Wesley carrying me? Why?

Blackness covers everything for a second.

Then Alice is in front of me, smiling and laughing. But I've not seen this version of Alice before. She's younger than she is now. It's as though I'm looking into a mirror.

"You're going to love it, Alessa," she says.

For a moment, I'm elated to see Alice so happy, but what is she talking about? I have no idea what this memory is of. I try to look away, to find Ronan's face, but I can't. I'm stuck looking at what's playing out in front of me and my eyes follow the scene involuntarily.

Small feet swing below me. A tiny fist rises in front of me. Alice moves aside, revealing a lush green clearing with a long table at its centre. An array of cups and saucers, teapots and sugar bowls, and flowers cover its surface. The white tablecloth hangs to the ground.

A tea party?

"Welcome to Wonderland," Wesley says.

I sense my feet touching the ground, then unsteadiness as the memory moves me forward. Flowers with heads the size of dinner plates line the edge of the clearing. I catch a glimpse of a figure crouched high in a tree,

but then arms circle me again and I'm whisked into the colour and magic of the tea party table.

"Alessa, don't eat those," Alice says, shuffling plates around. She pushes a pocket watch aside to pull a sugar bowl towards us.

"I'm glad we can finally do this," Wesley says.

"How did you manage it?" Alice pours tea into a cup covered in tiny red roses.

"Hatter is at the castle. He's with the Queen. I'm expected there soon." Wesley takes a sip from the cup. "But we have to stay alert. No one can know about Alessa."

Why? What is he talking about?

Again, I try to look at Ronan, but I'm stuck inside the memory. I desperately want to know if he can see what I see. If he knows what is going on. I have no recollection of ever going to Wonderland, but apparently, I have been there before. Why didn't Alice tell me?

"I know. But you really ought to be nicer to him," Alice says. "Ronan means well. If we told him before he—"

"No!" Wesley rubs his forehead. "Please don't ruin this, Alice. You don't know him like I do. You think you can trust him, but ... just let it be. He won't be here much longer."

Wesley lifts a teapot but his hand stops mid-air, tea sloshing from the spout. The ground shakes, and the cups and saucers on the table tinkle as they knock against each other. He sets the pot down with a thunk, then peers into a teacup at the place beside him. A chain dangles over the edge of it and snakes onto the table.

Déjà vu washes over me, and it takes a second for me to remember that I've seen this before in one of Alice's drawings.

"Something's wrong," he mumbles, pulling a pocket watch from his waistcoat.

The pocket watch!

My hand goes to my hip, but my pocket is on the bank of the lake with my other clothes.

Wesley reaches over and snags the chain that's hanging from the teacup, pulling another pocket watch out. Tea drips off it and splashes onto the tablecloth. The clock hands spin frantically, forwards, backwards, so fast they become a blur.

Tea explodes from a cup farther along the table, followed by more plinking sounds. Several pocket watches lay on the table in various places. The face explodes off the front of one, and a wave of dread churns through me.

"What's happening?" Alice asks.

I stare up at her and my heart feels full, but a deep frown mars her young face. She cocks her head, and the phantom feeling of being touched returns. Is she holding me?

Wesley jumps up. "Someone's coming."

The memory tilts and goes dark. I squint into the depths of the lake. Is it over? No, I can still hear muffled sounds. Light leaks in around me, a line along the ground. The vision moves me forward. More light. A small hand in front of me, holding the tablecloth aside.

Why did Alice put me under the table?

Someone bursts into the clearing. I vaguely feel Ronan's hand tighten around mine, but I'm too invested in the memory now, and he seems so distant. The memory forces me to look up, and my heart stutters at the sight of the Hatter standing on the grass.

He looks the same as he does now, only he's dressed as the Hatter and not as a pirate.

He races to the table, out of my view, and all I can do is listen.

"What did you do?" Wesley says, his voice raised. "From the look on your face, I know you've done something."

"I ... nothing ... I ... the Queen ... Time ..." the Hatter stutters, his voice devoid of confidence. He grabs his hair and pulls. "I can't remember!"

"What?" Wesley yells over the chatter of crockery. "Can't remember what?"

"Wesley, calm down," Alice says. Her legs appear in front of me, and I can't see what's going on.

"Calm down—?" The ground shakes again, cutting Wesley off.

A deep rumble sounds, and the tea ware clinks and rattles more violently.

"I don't think that's all," the Hatter says. "The Jabberwock ..." his voice trails off into a fierce whisper.

The memory allows me to peer around Alice's legs. Wesley clutches his pocket watch. Its hands are also spinning. Then plink, the glass cracks.

Wesley's eyes go wide. The ground shakes again, so much so I can feel it vibrating through me. Then Wesley stumbles and drops the timepiece. It hits the ground and bounces under the table. Seconds later, the cracked

watch face fills my vision, its hands stuck at six o'clock. Then I'm looking at Wesley again.

"What about the Jabberwock?" Wesley asks.

"She wants to send me away," the Hatter says, ignoring his question. "Actually, she wants to cut off my head first. She says Wonderland is better off without me. That all I ever do is ... break things."

My heart lurches, because the Hatter seems so timid and fragile. He's nothing like the man I know him to be.

"That's because *you* are broken," Wesley snaps. "And I'm sick of fixing everything for you. You can't keep breaking everything! One day, I won't be able to fix it. And then what? What do you think will happen to Wonderland then? You behave like a child. It's as though you don't want to grow up."

The Hatter's lips move as he mutters words I can't hear clearly enough to understand. He scratches his head, his eyes taking on a confused, vacant look. Then he fixes his glare on Wesley again, and he changes, his jaw clenching and his eyebrows drawing deep over his eyes.

"You!" the Hatter shouts, shaking his fist at Wesley. "I've never been good enough because of you." His voice deepens. "You should have been their son. Not me. Not the Mad Hatter."

The ground shakes and Wesley and the Hatter stumble. An ache trails up my arm, and I see in the memory that I'm clutching the pocket watch in my small fingers.

A giggle sounds as my hands come together. A red glow emanates from the back of the pocket watch, then a door appears behind the Hatter. Mixed emotions course through me. The innocence of a child, mixed with

the cold fear of a wiser adult. *How did I do that?* I still don't understand. I try to move forward, but the memory holds me back. I can't reach into it to help. All I can do is watch.

More shaking.

Alice shrieks.

Teacups rattle.

The door flies open.

"No!" Wesley yells.

He grabs Ronan and throws him to the side, then runs to the door, slamming it closed. Someone appears beside Ronan, reaching out with talon-like fingers.

Ronan runs.

A mix of happiness and confusion slams into me, my memory emotions warring with my real-world ones. The figure is slender, her ears pointy. I recognise her from Alice's drawings.

Chess.

The cat-like woman's mouth widens into her telltale grin. Then she sighs, staring off in the direction Ronan went. "Need some help?"

"Get him back to the castle," Wesley answers.

Chess disappears bit by bit, starting with her feet and working her way up until all that's left is her smile. Then she's gone, as though she has simply winked out of existence.

Alice lifts me into her arms and Wesley turns to us. He takes the pocket watch from my grasp, staring at the timepiece before looking directly at me. "Alessa, did you open that door?"

“Mean man,” a small voice replies. *My voice?*

But am I talking about Wesley or the Hatter?

“How ...?” He looks at the watch again, running his thumb over the glass in his monocle. Then he looks at Alice. “Take Alessa home. If she can open doorways ...” Wesley glances around the clearing, his eyes full of fear, then faces Alice again. “The Queen can’t know about any of this. I’ll come to you as soon as I can. As soon as I sort out Ronan and what he’s done.”

The trees rustle above as the ground shakes, more violently this time, and leaves rain down around us.

“Wesley, I’m scared,” Alice says.

Wesley raises his hand and a white circle appears on the end of his finger. He flicks it at the ground where it lands in the centre of the clearing, dirt and grass exploding as it swirls and opens a rabbit hole.

He grips Alice’s arm and kisses her quickly. “I know you’re scared, but you have to go. Now! Our daughter isn’t safe in Wonderland.” Then he pushes us into the rabbit hole, and everything goes dark.

OUR TICKET HOME

RONAN

Bubbles burst from Alessa's mouth. She clutches her chest and turns to me with wide eyes, her legs kicking frantically beneath her. She tugs on my hand, and I mimic her kicking, swimming us to the surface as Nerida darts away into the darkness.

Our heads break through the water. Alessa thrashes and splashes, but I hold her hand fast. If I release her, she might drown out here in the depths of the lake.

"Let me go!" she shouts, gawping at me, as though I'm a mass murderer. "You ..." Alessa tugs her hand. "What did you do?"

I clamp my fingers around hers. "What did *I* do? What the hell did Alice do? You're Wesley and Alice's *daughter*."

"Alice ..." Alessa's thrashing reduces until she's bobbing in the water beside me. "Alice is my ... my ..." she stutters, her lips shaking. "My mother?" she whispers. "How?"

"Do I really have to explain *that* to you?"

Alessa laughs, but it's a humourless sound. Water laps into her open mouth and she launches into a coughing fit. I pull her into my arms, holding her as I fight to tread water so she doesn't go under.

"Can you swim with me?" I ask. "Or do I have to drag you out of here?"

Alessa glances around. "I think so." Her voice is low and uncertain.

It's dark now. The stars and moon reflect on the lake, as though we're surrounded completely by sky, floating in space. She uses her hands to pull herself through the water towards the shore, and I swim at her side until our feet find the sandy bottom. She trudges out of the water towards our piles of clothing at the lake's edge, wrapping her arms around herself, her lips moving as she mutters something only she can hear.

I follow, thinking back to the memory the lake showed Alessa.

I had forgotten it until now.

Tick-tock.

Forget.

Forgotten that Alice and Wesley had a child with them. I had also assumed the doorway had been my mother's doing. Another attempt to get rid of me because I'd run from the castle. But Chess took me back to her, and I ended up here, in Neverland. As the Queen of Hearts, and the ruler of Wonderland, my mother's magic is stronger than the Red and White Queen's combined. She can do anything, to anyone, whenever she likes. It's one of the reasons why I hate her so much.

Alessa glances back at the lake, then her gaze meets mine. There are so many things I want to explain to her. Time ... the Jabberwock ... but I don't know what words to use, or how to even start. Because there is so much I don't remember.

If Alessa really is Wesley and Alice's daughter, I can understand why he never came back for them. She has Wonderland in her blood, and the Queen of Hearts won't like the fact that Alessa can open doorways, but her ability makes more sense now.

“On the bright side, we know *why* you can open doorways,” I say. “Wonderland is a part of you, and you are a part of it.”

“The bright side?” Alessa glares at me. “For my whole life, the people I love have lied to me.” Her voice rises and she clenches her fists. “My sister is my mother, my father is my grandfather, my real father abandoned me when I was a child, and I *still* don’t know how to open those bloody doors,” she yells, drops of water dripping from the ends of her hair. “And you ... released the Jabberwock? Bloody hell, Ronan!”

“If it’s any consolation, I don’t remember what I did. But I seem to be rubbing off on you.” I grin and raise my eyebrow.

Alessa scowls, pushing her wet hair away from her face. “Sometimes, cursing is warranted.”

“Aye,” I say, still smiling.

Alessa huffs, rubs her arms, then her eyes widen as she realises she’s only in her underwear. She drops her gaze, a blush rising into her cheeks as she turns around. I brush past her to retrieve my clothing, making her flinch. As I dress, I watch her from the corner of my eye. She fumbles with her own clothing, and although I shouldn’t take pleasure in making her more uncomfortable than she already is, seeing her so flustered thrills me.

Thinking about our kiss in the lake thrills me even more.

When she’s dressed, I return to her side, slip my finger around a lock of hair that’s plastered to her wet cheek, then tuck it behind her ear.

“What happened with the Jabberwock?” Alessa asks, facing me.

I drop my hand and bite the inside of my cheek, resisting the urge to step back, to retreat from the accusing tone in her voice. “That’s a story for another day, when I can remember what actually happened. I only have

fragments, and they don't fit together. Besides, it's no use going back to yesterday, because I was a different person then."

Alessa's lips form a small, sad smile, and she looks up at me.

The need to kiss her again rises into my chest and wraps itself around my heart, squeezing until it aches. This time, I do take a step back. Alessa has been bombarded with a mountain of new information, and I don't want to complicate things even further.

"Everyone with Wonderland blood has magic," I say, in an attempt to get back to the reason we're standing where we are. "I assume you don't know *how* you do it because you've never been taught what to do. You can thank Wesley for that."

"Can you teach me?" Alessa steps towards me, closing the gap I just created between us.

"If I could, I would have done that already, love."

Alessa furrows her brow and chews on her bottom lip. "If Wesley can create rabbit hole portals, and Chess can do that disappearing thing—"

"Teleport."

"Teleport." Alessa pauses. "And I can apparently create magical doorways. What can you do?"

I run my hand through my hair, then clench my fist, scratching the back of it with the tip of my hook. "General ... magic."

The Queen of Hearts is my mother. I *should* be able to do anything I like.

"You're a wizard?"

“Not really. We don’t have witches and wizards as such. Everyone in Wonderland has magic, but I was never very good at ... anything. As you saw in your infantile memory, I used to break stuff. A Lot. Happens when you’re broken yourself. Neverland is the only place I’ve managed to use my magic effectively.” I spread my arms wide. “I was so surprised I went a little overboard.” Alessa opens her mouth, but I close the gap between us, put my finger to her lips, and whisper, “Here, I’ll show you.”

With my thumb and forefinger, I pluck a crystal from a tree branch hanging above us, then let the small stone roll into my palm. It sparkles under the moonlight, refracting rainbows off each perfectly cut surface. Alessa holds my stare for a heartbeat, then looks at the crystal.

I stare into it, forming the image of a red rosebud inside my mind. The crystal grows, pushing out new angles and edges, until what I imagined now rests in my hand. Red sparkling petals, and a green thornless stem.

A breath puffs from Alessa’s lips. “It’s beautiful.” She touches the flower with her fingertips.

“Take it,” I say. “And keep watching.”

Alessa hesitates, but then carefully picks up the rosebud and holds the stem between her fingers. The crystal petals unfurl, as beautiful as the smile that spreads across Alessa’s lips. Then the surface of the crystal changes, and the rose becomes real.

“Amazing,” Alessa whispers.

“I haven’t finished yet.”

Her lips form an *O*, but she doesn’t speak. The rose curls in on itself. Alessa cups the flower in her hands as its stem and petals twist and fold

until they form the shape of a butterfly. It beats its ruby wings, crawling to Alessa's fingertips, then takes to the sky in a flutter.

"How ...?" She follows the butterfly's flight, her brow slightly creased and her mouth open.

"Imagination is the strongest magic of all. In Wonderland, it's known as Heart Magic, but mine has always been ... broken. I've always been broken."

"I don't believe that," Alessa says, shaking her head. "But if you can do things like this in Neverland, then why do you want to leave?"

"Always with the questions."

"Questions lead to answers," Alessa says.

"And more often than not, to more questions."

"If your magic doesn't work there, why do you want to go back to Wonderland?" Alessa asks the same question in a different way.

I shrug. "Wonderland is my home."

She looks out across the lake, the stars sparkling in her eyes. "How many times did you break Time?"

"I lost count. Time and I don't have a very good relationship."

She turns back to me. "You speak as though Time is a real person."

"I keep forgetting you've not been to Wonderland yet."

"Well, apparently I have, but I was too young to remember."

"Someday, I'll take you there." I grin.

"And the Jabberwock—"

“I told you, that’s a story for another day.” I step away from her to clear my head. “We’ve gotten side tracked and lost sight of why we’re here. We should be getting back to *Vengeance*.” I glance into the trees at the path we followed to the water’s edge. “We must get my key, then return to Wonderland. We know why you can open doorways now. We just need to refine the how.”

Alessa reaches into the folds of her dress and brings out the pocket watch. She turns it over a few times, running her fingertips along the crack in the glass. “It’s not really your key though, is it? It’s Wesley’s.”

“In Neverland, it belongs to me. And there has to be a reason why Wesley sent it here with me.”

I dig into my pouch for some faerie dust, then something rustles inside my satchel, and I remember the page from Alice’s journal. Now that Alessa has discovered Wesley and Alice are her parents, I’m almost certain the page has something to do with that. But why would Alice want to hide that she’s Alessa’s mother?

“Before we go, there’s something you should see.” I pull out the scrolled piece of paper and hold it out to Alessa.

She carefully unrolls it, then studies both sides. Her brow creases and she presses her lips together, turning the page over several times. “Is this from Alice’s journal?”

I nod. “I found it with the others in Alice’s room. I was hoping to learn what it says before I gave it to you, because I wasn’t sure it was something you should know. But I think I have a pretty good idea now of what Alice was trying to hide.”

“All the blacked-out words ...” Alessa’s voice trails off as she returns to studying the paper. She hangs the pocket watch from her wrist, then digs into her pocket again and brings out Alice’s small blue journal, flipping it open to where the pages have been torn out. “It matches,” she mumbles as she lines the torn edge up with the gutter of the book.

“Why would Alice want to pretend she’s your sister?” I ask, peering over Alessa’s shoulder.

“I always assumed Father ... my grandfather ... thought she was a disgrace to the family because of her madness.” Alessa looks to the sky, the Neverland moon hanging in her glassy stare. “But it was because she had me. An illegitimate child. *I’m* the one who has caused my family so much pain.” A tear rolls down her cheek, and she clutches the journal to her chest.

“No.” I move to stand in front of Alessa, brushing her tear away with my thumb and pressing my hand to her cheek. “Alice made her own choices. You had no part in that.”

Alessa shifts her gaze to mine and I smile at her. Her lips part, as though she is going to protest again, but instead, she closes the gap between us, standing on her toes so she can press her mouth to mine. I don’t stop her, and I return her kiss for a moment, but then gently pull away.

“Um ... we should ...” I run my hand through my hair.

“Okay,” Alessa says quietly, her gaze dropping to the book again.

“I just mean ... now—”

“Is not the time.”

The Neverland night hangs between us, the water from the lake gently lapping at the shore. Alessa raises her head and looks at me, her eyes as glassy as the crystal drops hanging from the trees.

“You have a lot to process. Any idea what that might say?” I point to the corner of the paper poking out of the journal.

Alessa slips it out and looks at the page again, turning it over and over, flipping from the blacked-out side to the side with the jumbled text. Then she holds it up with the blacked-out side facing her, letting the moonlight shine through the thin paper. The ink of the words becomes darker, and the scribbles fade to a translucent grey.

“It’s a poem,” she says.

We stand there, under the light of the Neverland moon, and read Alice’s words.

He took me off to Wonderland, down the rabbit hole.

He took me by the hand, down deep below.

I’ll show you all the magic here, he smiled and said to me.

Make a wish, close your eyes, one, two, three.

I wished upon a teacup, filled to the brim.

I fell in love with Wonderland, I fell in love with him.

He showed me all the magic, he showed me so much more.

He made me never want to leave, to never close the door.

I wished upon a shooting star, falling from the sky.

Together we were happy, together he and I.

Then our world shifted, it moved to the right.

*Up and down and sideways, all through the night.
I wished upon a pocket watch, to keep you safe inside.
I didn't know where to go, or where to hide.
My heart was heavy in my chest, my head was filled with fright.
Then you came into the world, bringing so much light.
He said we couldn't stay with him, he said we had to go.
He said he would come back for us, but when, he didn't know.
My father didn't welcome me, I was broken in his eyes.
I had to hide the truth from you, and fill your world with lies.
I made a final wish, upon a lonely tear.
As time went by, and you grew up, my love turned into fear.
He never came back for us, he left us all alone.
I should not have gone to Wonderland, if only I had known.*

Alessa's lips move as she reads the poem again and again. Her eyes sparkle under the moonlight, and tears run down her cheeks like crystals.

"She regrets having me," she whispers, swiping at her wet eyes.

"Seems we both have parents who don't want us." I stare out over the lake.

Paper rustles, and I turn back to Alessa. She fumbles with the other sheets that have been torn from the journal, holding them up to the moon as well. The letters that make Wesley's name are there, dark marks surrounded by grey. *Wesley ... Her father ...* It's written right in front of us, confirming what we both saw in the lake.

Alessa holds the poem up again. “Wished upon a pocket watch ... to keep you safe ... Who? Who did she want to keep safe? Me?”

“I don’t know.” I rest the timepiece hanging from Alessa’s arm in my hand. “We should go. Focus on getting the key. Then we can work out how to get home.”

“It is home. For both of us.” Alessa chews her bottom lip. “Isn’t it?”

“Aye,” I say.

She nods, putting the pocket watch and the journal back inside the folds of her dress. I sprinkle us with faerie dust until our skin glows with Tiger Lily’s orange hue, then take Alessa’s hand and kick off the ground. She doesn’t speak as we fly towards *Vengeance*, and I don’t play any tricks on her, keeping her tucked tightly into my side.

The lake didn’t give us the answers we were looking for. If anything, it’s made us ask more questions, but at least now I know one thing is certain. Alessa has Wonderland blood. She’s Wesley’s child, so she’s definitely our ticket home. Even if she doesn’t know how to get us there.

BARGAINING CHIP

ALESSA

Ronan holds me tightly as our feet touch down onto the deck of *Vengeance*. For a few heartbeats, he doesn't let me go, and I shiver as he presses a kiss to my temple.

"All right, love?" he asks.

All I can do is nod. Am I all right?

Alice is my mother.

Wesley is my father.

Wonderland is in my blood.

Why did Alice keep this from me?

Does she really regret going to Wonderland? Regret having me?

My head swims as I untangle myself from Ronan's embrace, and I'm not sure if it's from what I've learned, the flight back, or Ronan's intoxicating effect over me.

"Captain on board!" Smee shouts, and the crew snaps to attention.

I scan the deck for Lucy and spy her leaning against the opposite gunwale, talking to Jackson. She waves, but doesn't leave his side. I'll have to tell her about the lake another time, when my worries and newfound knowledge won't cloud her obvious happiness.

Ronan strides towards the steps leading to the quarterdeck. I follow, Wendeline's glare boring holes into the top of my head. *What is her*

problem? When we walk onto the deck, she doesn't speak, but then she doesn't have to. It's apparent she's still angry.

Ronan ignores her and stands at the railing overlooking the main deck. "Weigh anchor and hoist the mizzen!" he yells. "Nibs, set a course for Neverdrop. Eyes open for the *Crocodile*."

"Aye, Captain," Nibs replies.

The crew fly into a controlled frenzy as they prepare the ship to sail. But what is Ronan's plan? I twist my fingers together and stare at the back of his head as he stands watch over his ship. How does he intend to get the pocket watch key? He hasn't managed to get it back from Cordelia yet, so how is this time going to be any different? Sheer determination isn't enough, because I know he has plenty of that.

What he hasn't had in his past attempts is me.

As angry as I am at Alice for hiding the truth, for letting me live a life filled with lies, I still need to get back to her. She's my family. The plan has always been to get to Wonderland, and if Ronan can't figure out how to do that, then I will. All this talk about going after Cordelia won't make it actually happen.

There is so much I don't understand, but every time I've managed to open a doorway, it's been linked by the pocket watch and the key. I slip my hand into my pocket and clutch the timepiece. Seconds later, a door appears on the aft side of the quarterdeck. Cordelia wears the key around her neck, so the door should lead me straight to her. I wrap my fingers around the head of the crocodile on the handle and pull the door open. If I can sneak on board and surprise her ...

“You stupid girl!” Wendeline yells, but my foot is already on the other side of the threshold.

“Alessa, no!” Ronan shouts.

I keep going. Cordelia won’t be expecting me to confront her, and when I have the key, I’ll be able to open another door to get back to *Vengeance*.

I hope.

“Alessa,” Ronan shouts again, but when I look over my shoulder, Wendeline is holding him back. She slams the door, and it shimmers into nothing.

She’s probably happy to see me gone, and I have a word I want to call her, but I can’t bring myself to say it, even in my mind. It’s obvious Wendeline is fighting her own battle that I really know nothing about.

Dull light surrounds me. My body sways and I stumble, throwing my arms out to steady myself. I bump into something, and pain lances across my thigh. The floor beneath my feet rocks again. I must be onboard the *Crocodile*, but where?

Oil lamps light the corners, burning low. I blink through the yellow gloom, and shapes form in the shadows. A bed, a table. Shelves filled with books. A cabin? But whose cabin?

Something glows red across the other side of the room.

The key!

I must be in Cordelia’s quarters.

The leather strap hangs from a hook on the wall. The ship rocks again and the key sways, scraping on the wood panelling. I take a step to cross

the room when the cabin door opens. Cordelia's gaze locks onto me, and a sly smile forms slowly on her lips.

"Well, this is going to be interesting," the pirate woman says. "I see Ronan is getting you to do his dirty work now."

I press my hand against the pocket watch under my dress, willing it to open another doorway so I can escape, but nothing happens.

I have nowhere to run.

The key glows brighter, and I glance at it, drawing Cordelia's attention to it.

I force myself to stand taller. "I'm not here for Ronan. I'm here for me. Now, give me the key."

Cordelia chuckles. "When I dared you to try and take it from me, I didn't think you'd have the gall to follow through."

"Hand it over," I reply, trying to keep my voice even.

"Did you really think you could come in here and make such demands?"

"It doesn't belong to you."

"Then why am I the one who has it in my possession?"

I hold her stare, then glance at the key again. It's clear she has no intention of giving it to me. If I can reach it before her, I might be able to get away through a new doorway. Provided my theory is correct and I can actually open one when I have both pieces. *Be brave, Alessa. She's hardly going to kill you.*

With a deep breath, I lunge across the room. Something whistles beside my ear and I stop as a knife thwacks into the wall. The hilt wobbles.

My pulse thunders in my ears and I choke on my breaths as fear grips my heart.

Maybe she will kill me.

“Next time, I won’t miss,” Cordelia says, retrieving the blade. She grabs my arm and shoves me out of the cabin, pressing the knife tip between my shoulder blades. “Walk.”

I do as she says, following the hall to the door that opens onto the main deck. She forces me outside towards the main mast. The crew around us halt their tasks and stare.

“We have a stowaway!” Cordelia yells.

The crew cheer, whistle, and stamp their feet. I dare not move, afraid the knife in Cordelia’s hand will slide into my back.

“She won’t agree to our code,” Cordelia continues. “What should we do with her?”

The crew all yell at once, their voices forming a drone of angry words.

“Tie her up.”

“Walk the plank.”

“I’ll look after her!” A burly man with greasy blond hair smirks, and I cringe.

“I say we feed her to the mermaids,” Cordelia says. “They’d love something to play with.”

The crew cheer again. Four men scurry along the deck, hauling out a long piece of wood from behind a row of barrels. They slide it into a slit in the gunwale, wood scraping on wood.

“Walk the plank, walk the plank,” the crew chant, shaking their fists.

She really is going to kill me!

A sharp pain flares on my back and I lurch forward to escape it. Cordelia comes up behind me and whispers in my ear, “I hope he was worth it.”

She shoves me into the gunwale. I clutch it tightly, peering over the side of the ship. It’s not as far down to the water as it is from the deck of *Vengeance*, but it’s still a fall I don’t want to take. My stomach flops and bile rises into my throat.

As the waves lap against the hull of the *Crocodile*, I wonder why Cordelia is so horrible? Does she enjoy lording over people? Does this sort of aggression make her feel superior? Maybe if I fight back, I’ll take her by surprise. Only now, I won’t be fighting for the key. I’ll be fighting for my life.

Anger rising inside me, I spin to face Cordelia, and something tugs at my hip as I turn. *I have a weapon!* With trembling fingers, I grasp the handle of Ronan’s dagger and unsheathe it. What did Ronan say? *Point it at my attacker and stab them if they come too close.*

Cordelia laughs. “Really? You’re going to fight me?”

I stand taller and adjust my grip on the hilt of the dagger. “If that’s what it takes, yes.”

The pirate captain draws her cutlass and lunges before I can even raise my hand. Her blade connects with mine, a clang sounding across the ship. The blow sends a shockwave up my arm and into my shoulder. Cordelia flicks her wrist. My fingers twist and I lose my grip on the weapon.

Ronan’s dagger flies into the air, then drops over the side of the *Crocodile*. I press my back into the gunwale in a futile attempt to get

farther away from Cordelia. She stands so close her toes touch mine, then leans over me until my head and shoulders are forced out over the side of the ship.

“You were saying?” She smirks.

I press my palms onto the ship’s railing, my fingers aching from the trembling that I can’t control.

Cordelia steps back. “Get her onto the plank.”

Two men rush forward and grab my arms, hauling me up onto the long piece of wood. Rough hands shove me, and I stumble a few steps along the narrow timber. My heart beats in my ears as I glance down at the water below, foam surging against the ship’s hull. The darkness of the water fills my vision and nausea rolls through my stomach. I stumble another step, then face the crew.

Don’t look down again, Alessa.

Cordelia climbs onto the plank and extends her cutlass, aiming it at my breastbone. “Keep walking.”

My legs wobble, but I stay where I am and grit my teeth.

Cordelia moves closer.

The tip of her blade pierces my skin. I wince and glance at the small bloom of red spreading into the fabric of my bodice. The pirate captain puts more pressure on her sword and I step back, an ache spreading across my chest.

Cordelia moves again, her cutlass tip now coated with my blood. I shuffle backwards to avoid her blade, then my foot slips and I pinwheel my arms.

A smile spreads across Cordelia's face.

It's the last thing I see as I tumble off the *Crocodile*.

A scream rips from my mouth.

I squeeze my eyes closed and brace myself for the impact, expecting cold sea water to engulf me at any moment. Then I hit something and spin. Someone grunts. A hand locks onto my arm, leaving me dangling in the air. My foot dips into the water, sending a shock of cold up my leg, then my stomach drops away as I rise into the air.

"You're heavy," a voice yells down to me.

I stare up into Peter's face, the Neverland moon a halo behind his head. "That's no way to speak to a lady."

Peter's laugh echoes across the Neversea. "If you're in cahoots with Ronan, my guess is, you're no lady."

"Let me go," I say, struggling in his grip.

"You'd rather fall into the sea than be rescued by me?"

I look down. The *Crocodile* is now the size of a toy ship bobbing on the water's surface. I scramble to grab Peter's other arm. He hauls me up and wraps an arm around my waist, pulling me close.

"Didn't think so." He grins, but there's a slight tremor in his voice.

Then something flicks behind his eyes. His heart thumps rapidly, out of time with mine. Is he nervous? I thought he was a murderer. Since when do murderers get nervous?

"Can you take me back to *Vengeance*, please?" I ask, pressing my palms to Peter's chest in an attempt to put some space between us.

"Ha!" he says. "No chance. You're my new bargaining chip."

“For what?”

“Why, Neverland, of course. And if that doesn’t work, I’ll just kill you. That should really piss Ronan off.”

Another scream forces its way out of my mouth as Peter turns us around and we dive towards the *Crocodile*. What is he planning to do? Give me back to Cordelia? No. he said he would kill me if his plan doesn’t work. He has to keep me to do that. We reach the ship and he circles the vessel, his arms tightening around me.

Cordelia stares up at us from the quarterdeck. “What are you playing at, Pan?” she yells.

“I want Neverland back.” He pulls us up, hovering over the helm. “And you’re going to help me.”

Cordelia scoffs. “Neverland is fine the way it is. And why in Hook’s name would I ever want to help you?”

“Because.” Peter chuckles, and it makes me shudder. “I can defeat Ronan. You’ll never need to worry about him again.”

Defeat Ronan? As in kill him, too? *This boy is a lunatic!*

Cordelia’s shoulders shake, and laughter erupts from her mouth, tumbling into the air. She grins. “You couldn’t defeat him the last time you two were at loggerheads. How will you do it this time?”

“I have something he wants.” Peter’s arm cinches my waist, and he smirks, a mischievous glint flashing behind his eyes. “With her life on the line, he’ll give me everything I want.”

“Last time you had Wendeline, and look how that turned out.”

Peter scowls. He opens his mouth, but before he can respond, a streak of green flashes past. It passes again, and again. Moments later, we're surrounded by a wall of shimmering glitter that forces us away from the ship.

"What are you doing?" Tinker Bell shrieks. "You're such an ass, Peter. Let her go."

"Keep your faerie nose out of this, Tink," Peter says.

Tinker Bell floats in front of us, her tiny hands on her hips. "No. I don't answer to you, Peter Pan."

"Since when?" he shouts. "You're *my* faerie."

Tinker Bell shakes her head and scowls. "I'm my own faerie. I don't live in your *shadow* anymore."

Peter's hold on me loosens as his face reddens. "Tink, where *is* my shadow?"

"I'm not telling."

It looks like Tinker Bell has a bargaining chip, too. I have no idea what is going on between her and Peter, but I wish they would have their argument on solid ground. The *Crocodile* is a blob in the darkness now. I can't see the island, and the water is much closer than before. My fingers ache as I twist them into the fabric of Peter's shirt, hanging on tight.

"You better tell me, or I'll—"

"What, Peter?" The green faerie's face reddens as well, and she narrows her eyes. "Ronan was right. You don't care about me. You just make me angry all the time. You bring out the worst in me."

"You're listening to Captain Hook now?" Peter yells.

“At least he hasn’t killed anyone!”

Peter swipes at Tinker Bell, and I slip from his grasp, plunging into the sea. My chest constricts from the sudden cold as I swipe my arms through the water in an attempt to pull myself to the surface, but something tugs me down. It jerks at my waist. Bubbles erupt from my mouth as I fight against the force dragging me into the blackness of the Neversea.

As the light fades, so does the oxygen from the one breath I had in my lungs. My chest burns with the need to breathe. More bubbles float in front of me and water fills my mouth. My eyelids flutter as I struggle to keep them open. Is this what drowning feels like?

I stop fighting, and let the calmness of the sea depths press into me. The water caresses my skin and face. It parts my lips, and I think back to the kisses I’ve shared with Ronan. I wish there had been time for more. His face appears in my mind, and I cling to my memories of him as I drift into blackness.

“Breathe,” someone says, trailing a finger down my cheek.

When I open my eyes, a delicate face floats before me, surrounded by waving strands of green hair. The creature’s skin emits a soft glow, as though it is lit from within. It penetrates the darkness, and I run my gaze down the length of the creature’s body, which is covered in scales.

A mermaid.

“Breathe,” she says again.

I suck in a sharp breath, aware that my lips are now dry and the bottom part of my face is encased in a bubble.

The mermaid presses her palm to my cheek, and her big, round eyes stare at me through the gloom. Scales line her cheekbones and jaw, and she

has small fins down the sides of her neck. She flicks her tail, the scales shimmering in shades of aqua and turquoise.

Something moves in my peripheral vision. Another mermaid. And another. They all have the same shimmering scales and waving hair. The three of them surround me, and my chest tightens. But surely, they must mean me no harm if they have saved me from drowning.

The mermaid in front of me slips her hands down to my waist and inspects the sheath for Ronan's sword.

"I lost it," I say. "It fell into the sea. Have you seen it?"

"Come," she says, taking my hand and guiding me farther into the depths.

The mermaids swim around me, and the sense of fear I felt before washes away as I glide along with them. Up ahead, a dim light seeps into the ocean's shadows, becoming brighter and brighter as we draw nearer. The light spills out of a cave entrance, the surrounds decorated with a garden of coloured coral and sea life.

I follow the pod into the passageway, which is lit by iridescent jellyfish that float lazily near the ceiling. When we reach the end, the passage opens into a cavern. I swim up until I break the water's surface and emerge into a pool. The bubble around my mouth bursts, and I take in a gulp of salty air.

The mermaids circle me, floating with their heads and shoulders out of the water, their tails swishing beneath us. The movement of the water keeps me afloat. The differences between them are apparent now that they are out of the shadowy depths. It must have been the darkness of the ocean that made them appear the same colour. One has a red shimmer on the edges of her aqua scales. Another has streaks of black through her green

hair. The one who helped me breathe has longer neck fins than the others, and her skin is paler.

“Do you have names?” I ask, directing my question at her.

“I am Jewel,” she answers. “My sisters are Pearl and Ava.”

“Where are we?” I ask.

“Beneath Marooner’s Rock.”

“I have no idea where that is,” I mumble.

“It is our home,” Jewel says.

Something comes over Jewel’s features. They twist and bulge. Her eyes darken. She pulls her lips back to reveal sharp and uneven teeth. Then, in a heartbeat, she’s back to her luminous and beautiful self.

My heart races. What did I just see? Is that her real face? I glance at each mermaid. The need to get out of the water engulfs me until my chest constricts and I struggle to breathe.

“Jewel,” a voice scolds. “Don’t scare Alessandria, please.”

A woman, wearing a corset of coral and seashells over a flowing midnight blue skirt, emerges from a passageway. She steps lightly over the rocks to the pool. The three mermaids break their circle around me and I swim to the edge. The woman reaches down, offers me her hand, and I take it, letting her help me out of the water. As I emerge, the moisture disappears from my skin and clothing, leaving me dry.

The woman smiles with her lips closed, then releases my hand. I study her face. There’s something familiar about the pattern of scales on her cheeks.

“Nerida?” I ask. She inclines her head. “Your sisters saved me. Thank you.”

“It was necessary,” Nerida says. “Neverland needs you. But Wonderland needs you more.”

WHAT'S HARD AND WHAT'S RIGHT

RONAN

The image through the doorway is dim, but I've been inside Cordelia's cabin enough times to recognise it.

"Alessa, no!" I shout.

I move to go after her, but the doorway is at the far end of the quarterdeck, and by the time my feet move, she has crossed the threshold. Wendeline grabs me from behind. Alessa glances over her shoulder and our gazes connect for a heartbeat. Her eyes are filled with an apology, but I can't forgive her for this.

She's putting herself in danger.

"Alessa!"

The door slams and disappears. Wendeline's fingers dig into my upper arms. I raise them and spin, yanking free of her grasp. The blade of my cutlass scrapes against its scabbard as I draw my weapon and face my quartermaster.

Wendeline takes a step back. "She's on a fool's errand."

"Don't!" I yell, extending my blade. "Don't you dare try to justify what you've done."

"Ever since she showed up, you haven't been thinking clearly. I couldn't let you follow her."

"Alessa just boarded the *Crocodile*. She doesn't stand a chance against Cordelia," I say.

“Neither do you,” Wendeline snaps.

I stomp towards her until she has nowhere to go. We stand toe to toe, her back against the quarterdeck railing that looks over the main deck. My pulse races in my ears. I raise my hook and rest it against Wendeline’s cheek.

“If anything happens to Alessa, I will gut you and hang you from the crow’s nest,” I say, using everything I have in me to keep my voice even.

“You’ve always been the charmer, haven’t you? You’re becoming more and more like Peter every day.” Wendeline shoves me away. “I’m looking out for you, Ronan. Since you can’t see that what’s hard and what’s right is often the same thing.”

“Nibs,” I say, keeping my eyes on Wendeline. “Stay course to Neverdrop.”

“Aye, Captain,” he replies.

“Rose!” I shout. Moments later, a pink streak flies onto the quarterdeck. The tiny faerie hovers between Wendeline and me. “Speed, if you please. We must find the *Crocodile*.”

“Sure thing, Captain.” She flits towards the sails and coats them in glitter.

I glare at my quartermaster and raise my cutlass again. “Draw your sword.”

“No.” She scowls.

“Then get off my ship.”

Wendeline starts. “You don’t mean that.”

“Aye, I do.” I take a few steps back and adjust my stance. “You want to stay on *Vengeance*, you need to earn your place. Because as things currently stand, I don’t trust you anymore.”

“I’m trying to save you from yourself,” she shouts.

“I’m not you. I don’t need saving.”

Wendeline steps towards me, her eyes never leaving mine, but she doesn’t draw her weapon. She raises her hand and slaps me. The force of the blow sends a throb down into my neck.

“I will not fight you, Ronan Heart,” she says through gritted teeth. “But I’m not leaving either. If you don’t trust me, after everything we’ve been through, then so be it. But I will never stop doing what I must to protect you. I owe you that much.” Then she turns and runs down onto the main deck. The crew makes a path for her. “You heard the Captain, Rose!” Wendeline cranes her neck to stare up at the ship’s faerie. “Get the wind into those sails.”

When she looks back at me, she’s still scowling, but her actions are the best apology I’m going to get. I return my cutlass to its sheath, then rub the ache from my jaw. Despite how infuriating she is, Wendeline is the least of my worries now.

What the bloody hell was Alessa thinking?

Cordelia doesn’t know how to play nice. My only hope is that the captain of the *Crocodile* is in a good mood. If the ship is still in the bay, then Alessa is as safe as she can be with a bunch of unruly pirates. But if Cordelia and her crew are on the Neversea, there are no rules.

We round Wonderheart Lighthouse and fly past Fae Refuge. Rose is really giving *Vengeance* some speed.

“Easy, Rose,” I shout. “Keep her on the water.”

The faerie falls back, dropping her hands to her sides.

“Ship ahoy,” Curly calls from the crow’s nest.

I extend my scope and search the dark horizon until I find the shape of the *Crocodile* dead ahead. We’re still too far away. Anything could have happened to Alessa by now.

“Rose,” I call to the faerie again.

She streaks down to me, her gossamer wings flicking pink dust into the air. “You called.”

“Drop the wind completely. We want to stay out of firing range. I’m going to fly to the *Crocodile*. Can you scout, please?”

Rose taps her heels together and salutes. “Aye, Captain. See you in the air.” She flits off towards the ship looming in the distance, and moments later the wind falls from the sails.

I put my scope away, then dip my fingers into the pouch of faerie dust on my belt, sprinkling it onto my skin as I take the stairs down to the main deck.

“Do you think boarding the *Crocodile* is a wise decision?” Wendeline asks, a scowl still marring her beautiful face.

“If it means getting Alessa back, then yes,” I say. “You have the ship while I’m gone.”

I kick off the deck without waiting for Wendeline’s reply. She’s lucky I didn’t pick her up and throw her overboard before, but I know *Vengeance* is safe in her hands.

The cool Neverland night air buffets my face as I fly towards Cordelia, and hopefully Alessa. The surface of the sea sparkles with light from the moon and stars, and I can make out a small smudge of pink sparkles flitting across the sky ahead.

A blob of green joins Rose. Tinker Bell? What's she doing out here? The faeries dance around each other, then Rose darts towards me, Tinker Bell in tow.

"Ronan, Ronan!" Rose yells. "Alessa is overboard."

My heart skips several beats. Then it races so fast I fear it might burst out of my chest.

"What?" I shout, flying past the faeries with my sights set on the *Crocodile*.

"Cordelia made her walk the plank," Rose says, flying at my right side.

"But Peter saved her," Tinker Bell says from my left.

Rose darts out in front and scowls at Tinker Bell. "Yeah, and then he dropped her in the water."

I pull up and hover so I'm a safe distance above the rising and falling waves of the sea. "Why was Peter out here? Actually, I don't want to know." I pinch the bridge of my nose and take a deep breath.

"He was trying to kidnap Alessa so he could make a bargain with you," Tinker Bell says anyway. "But I stopped him."

"By letting her fall into the Neversea," Rose adds, sitting on my shoulder.

"He was saving her by trying to kidnap her?" I ask. "My night is getting better and better by the second."

“I stopped him,” Tinker Bell says again, her voice rising and her eyes going wide. “I told him he’s an ass and that he brings out my worst parts and I’m not going to live in his shadow any more. Just like you said I shouldn’t. I even hid his shadow. Then Alessa slipped into the water. Peter was really angry. You know he can’t go after her. He tried to catch me, but I’m too fast for him.” She stops and takes a deep breath, her tiny shoulders shuddering.

“You took his shadow?” Rose asks.

“Yep. And he—”

“Never mind that now, Tink.” I search the surface of the water between us and the looming shadow of the *Crocodile*. “Did you see if Alessa made it back to the surface?”

Tinker Bell shakes her head.

“If she didn’t come up,” Rose says, “maybe the mermaids found her.”

“Either that, or she drowned.” Tinker Bell shrugs.

“Not helpful,” I say through gritted teeth.

I stare into the dark waters below again. The Neversea is teeming with mermaids, so Alessa’s chances of being found are high. The mermaids know when something foreign is in the water, which is why I don’t like swimming in the ocean. Being immersed in seawater is like being covered in mermaids, and the salt water has an eerie effect, as though the mermaids can see inside your mind.

Plus, most of them don’t like me very much.

I hope they *do* like Alessa.

I reach into my satchel and take out Wendeline's mershell. As much as I dislike mermaids, the only way to be certain if Alessa has been rescued is to call them and ask. The Neversea is huge, and she could be anywhere. It would be like searching for one particular scale in a school of fish.

I put my mouth over the end of the conch and blow. A deep, drawn-out note reverberates across the water, sounding into the Neverland night. I make another two notes, completing the summons signal. The closest mermaid should answer my call.

The Neversea ripples beneath me, and bubbles float on the surface in a circle. A face appears in the inky water, staring up with big eyes. The mermaid rises until her head and shoulders are out of the water, her tail swishing below in flicks of shimmering blue.

"Coral," I say.

"Ronan." Her voice is like warm water running over my skin. "How can I help?" She fixes her stare on me and her influence seeps into my mind.

I blink rapidly to clear my focus and shake her glamour. "Alessa. She fell into the sea. Do you know where she is?"

"Straight to the point, as always."

"Stop trying to seduce me and maybe I'll be nice."

"You never like to play, do you?"

"Not when you play dirty," Rose adds.

"Alessa," I say again. "Can you find her?"

Coral runs her hands over the top of the water, creating more ripples as she rises and falls with the waves. The mermaid closes her eyes, then lifts

her hands until the sea water drips from her fingertips. “She is with Nerida.” Coral opens her eyes and stares at me.

“Is she safe?”

“You did hear me say Nerida, didn’t you?”

“Is she in the lake?” I’m beginning to sound like Alessa with all my questions.

“No. Would you like me to take you to them?”

“Yes,” I say, before I can think it through.

“Ronan, no.” Rose launches from my shoulder. “It’s not safe.”

Voluntarily travelling through the ocean with a mermaid is not the smartest option. But if it will get Alessa back faster, then that’s what I’ll do.

“Report back to Wendie,” I say, looking at my ship faerie. “Take Tink with you.”

Rose crosses her arms and frowns. “Why? She’s nothing but trouble.”

“Hey!” Tinker Bell protests.

“What? You are,” Rose retorts.

“Only because—”

“Stop it. Both of you.” I glare at them. “I made Tink a promise not too long ago. If she wants me to follow through, this is her chance not to mess up again. But you have to behave.” I focus on the green faerie.

She nods, but keeps her mouth shut this time. Maybe Tinker Bell really is trying to be a better faerie. The fact that she’s here, and she even told Rose about Alessa falling into the Neversea in the first place, is a good sign that she’s at least trying.

“Tell Wendie to stay course for Neverdrop and avoid the *Crocodile* at all costs.” I remove my pouch of faerie dust and pass it to Rose.

“Aye, Captain,” Rose says, clutching the string of the pouch so it dangles beneath her. “Come on, then.” She looks Tinker Bell up and down, then flits off towards *Vengeance*. The green faerie catches up and helps carry my pouch.

I smile, then turn my focus back to Coral, who has been patiently waiting with her eyes closed and her palms resting on the surface of the sea.

“Shall we?” she asks, opening her eyes slowly.

“Let’s get this over with.”

I take a deep breath, then slip into the water up to my neck. The faerie dust on my skin dissolves instantly, and I tread water. Coral fixes her stare on me, and I fight her glamour until my head aches.

“You have to let me in,” she says. “Otherwise, you’ll drown.”

“How do I know you won’t drown me, anyway?”

A small smile touches her lips. “We’ve been here before, Ronan.”

“Let’s just say, I have trust issues.”

“Are you ready?” she asks, ignoring my comment.

In response, I duck under the surface and wait. Coral joins me, places her hands on either side of my face, then parts her lips. Surrendering to a mermaid is dangerous, but I must if I want her help. I let my guard slip, and she creeps into my mind, wrapping her warmth around my thoughts.

A bubble floats from between her lips, expands until it can cover my nose and mouth, then connects with my face. I suck in a sharp breath that

tastes like seaweed and salt. Then I'm pulled into the depths of the Neversea.

USE TIME WISELY

ALESSA

Water splashes, and I turn as Jewel, Pearl, and Ava disappear beneath the surface of the cave pool. Nerida returns to the mouth of the passageway she emerged from, then beckons me to follow.

I smooth my hands over my skirt, then pick my way over the slick, rocky ground. The passage is lit with slug-like creatures that cling to the walls and glow like the jellyfish I saw on my way in.

The long hall twists in several directions before opening out into another chamber with a pool at the centre. There are three more tunnels leading off into darkness, and Nerida takes me along the middle one to yet another cave with a pool.

Unlike the others, this has only one entrance. Fine silk drapes the rocks around the left edge of the cave, and there are puffy cushions scattered on top. Nerida makes her way over and sits, pulling her skirt back until it piles behind her. She dips her feet in the water, and scales shimmer along her legs as they morph into her tail. She swishes it back and forth, her scales changing from purple to green in the iridescent light.

“Please, sit.” She points to the cushion beside her. “Perhaps there are matters you would like to discuss?”

I make myself comfortable, then say, “Have you seen my dagger? I asked your sisters, and they brought me here.”

“The dagger does not matter at this exact moment. There are more pressing issues on your mind. You need only address them. Did the lake show you what you needed to remember?”

I frown, because I sense the dagger *is* important. It belongs to Ronan, and he wants to take it to Wonderland. But I decide to humour her. “Yes, and no. I learnt something that shocked me, but it helped me understand something about myself as well.”

“You’re from Wonderland.”

“I ... I have Wonderland blood, but it’s not the same thing. How do you know?”

Nerida studies me for a long moment, her round eyes filled with a wisdom I’ve not seen before. When she speaks, her voice is low and controlled. “I see everything the lake holds. What are your intentions here in Neverland?”

The question takes me by surprise. My intentions? I never intended to come here in the first place.

“I’m not exactly sure what you mean,” I say, “but I *intend* to get to Wonderland. To get back to my sister ... My ... mother.”

“Ronan has tried many times to go home, and he has failed.” Nerida leans forward and dips her fingers into the water.

“Do you know why?”

“Wonderland broke his heart, and he believes it does not want him.” Nerida brings her hand up and a sphere of water rests in her palm. “Sometimes, what we believe becomes the truth.”

“Believe the impossible, and the impossible becomes believable,” I mumble.

“Indeed. Ronan is his own worst enemy. His magic is powerful here, and he has built a world reflecting that. Neverland protects him from his deepest fears.”

“He can’t return home because he *believes* he can’t?” I ask. “Because he’s scared?”

“Ronan has put his heart into Neverland and lost the key.” The ball of water in Nerida’s palm mists over, then it parts to reveal Wonderheart Lighthouse. “In doing so, he has unwittingly cursed himself. He believes Wonderland does not want him, so Neverland won’t let him go.”

I stare at the lighthouse inside the sphere of water. “Then how do we break the curse?”

Nerida closes her fingers, bursting the ball, then fixes her gaze on me. “Believe the impossible, and the impossible becomes believable. Ronan’s key does more than wind a pocket watch. It’s the key to his heart. He needs to fix his broken heart. The essence of who he is. And only then will Neverland let him go.”

“Why have you not told him this before?”

Nerida laughs. “There is only so much I can tell him. He knows the key is integral to his return home, which is why he is so determined to retrieve it. But I cannot tell him why or how. I swore an oath, and that prevents me from helping him further.”

“An oath? To who?”

The mermaid tilts her head. “To Wonderland ... You must be careful, Alessa. Things are this way for a reason. Ronan is here because there was a

time when he needed to be.”

I worry at my lip, sifting through all the information Nerida has shared, trying to make sense of it. “He will never give up.”

“I hope he doesn’t. Wonderland needs both of you.”

“What will happen to Neverland if Ronan gets home?”

“You mustn’t worry about that. The islands were here long before Ronan added his magic to them. Neverland has survived without him before, and it will do so again.”

I fiddle with the fabric on my skirt and stare into the pool of water. “It all seems impossible. He’s tried to get the key. But Cordelia is too strong.”

“It’s not about physical strength.” Nerida swishes her tail, sending ripples over the surface of the pool. “Ronan must learn to use Time wisely.”

I’m about to ask her what she means when another mermaid breaks through the ripples on the water. A moment later, Ronan surfaces beside her, gasping for air. The mermaid disappears back into the depths. Ronan coughs as he swims to the edge of the pool, setting his hook into the rock to haul himself out. He sits on the edge, water droplets spraying from his hair as he runs his hand through it. When his eyes meet mine, my stomach flips, then it churns at his dark expression.

He’s angry.

“What were you thinking?” Ronan gets to his feet, flicking water from his hand and hook.

“Be calm,” Nerida says, before I can reply. “Alessandria is perfectly safe.”

The mermaid touches the back of his hand, and Ronan's skin and clothing dry instantly. He runs his fingers through his hair again.

"You could have died," Ronan says, ignoring Nerida and glaring at me.

"But I didn't." I sit straighter, pushing my shoulders back.

"How did you plan to take on Cordelia by yourself?" Ronan's voice rises, echoing around the cave.

"I didn't think—"

"Then you shouldn't—"

"Don't cut me off." I get to my feet, my own anger rising to the surface. "I was trying to help."

Ronan clenches his jaw, his nostrils flaring. "You could have—"

"Died. Yes, you already said that." I raise my chin.

"What's done is done," Nerida says. She flicks her tail, brings it down to slap the water, then stares up at Ronan. "You need to stop dwelling on the past and use it to your advantage instead."

"Why are you always so bloody cryptic?" Ronan says, his brow creasing.

"I cannot tell you what to do." Nerida raises her hand and the water swirls. Moments later, the dagger breaks the surface. "I can only guide you." She moves her fingers in a beckoning motion, and the sword moves towards her. She grasps the hilt, then passes the weapon to me. "Be more careful with this. You'll need it when you return to Wonderland."

Ronan scoffs. "You mean *if* we return to Wonderland."

"You will." Nerida withdraws her tail from the water. Her scales shimmer, replaced by smooth skin as they recede and her human legs

form. She stands and faces Ronan. “Contrary to what you believe, Time is on your side.”

“Time has never been on my side.” Ronan clenches his fist.

I mimic his action, and I’m still clutching the hilt of the dagger. For a heartbeat, I stare at it as though I’ve never seen it before. It seems so foreign in my grip. How did I think I could fight Cordelia? What if the mermaids hadn’t saved me from drowning? My hands shake, and it takes me a few attempts to get the tip into the sheath and slide the blade home. The weapon feels heavier on my hip than it did before. When we return to *Vengeance*, Ronan can have it back.

“Please take us back to *Vengeance*,” Ronan says. “I have work to do.”

The anger in his voice is apparent, and I don’t miss that he didn’t say we have work to do. I’m not sure if I’m angry at the way Ronan has reacted, or touched that he seems to care so much about what happens to me.

“I shall return you to exactly where you need to go.” Nerida cups some water into her hands, raising it to her mouth. She drinks, then parts her lips to release two pearl-sized droplets of water. They roll onto her palm and she holds them out between us. “Swallow these. The pool will take you back.”

Ronan pinches a water pearl between his fingers, his eyes still dark and angry, then puts it on his tongue. I do the same. He grabs my hand and jumps without saying goodbye to Nerida, forcing me to follow him into the water. Cold and darkness surrounds me, Ronan’s hand in mine the only point of difference. Then my head breaks the surface and I draw in a deep breath.

Droplets run into my eyes. I blink them away as I tread water and look around. Ronan has let go of my hand and my palm is colder than the rest of me. The full Neverland moon shines onto the water, and I can make out the shape of land not too far away. Trees line the shore, their gnarly branches twinkling silhouettes against the dark sky.

“Damn it!” Ronan yells, slapping the water with his hand.

“Where are we?” I ask. “Is this the lake?”

I move my arms in the water to turn and look around us again.

“Yes,” Ronan growls. “Come on.”

He swims towards the shore, not offering to help me like he did the last time we swam here. I have so much to tell him, but it seems it will have to wait. I follow him, my arms and my heart heavy. Then something pulls at my hip. Water fills my mouth as I’m dragged under. I fight to get back to the surface, but it’s no use. My chest aches as I hold my breath.

A vision fills my head, like the memories I saw when I discovered Alice and Wesley are my parents. I stop fighting and watch as the scene before me unfolds.

Ronan walks towards me through the thicket of a dark forest. His top hat sits slightly askew. His hands, both hands, break through the dead and twisted wood. Mist swirls around his shins. His fingers splay and then reach for me. No, not me. Whatever he is looking at.

Something screeches, and the sound pierces my brain, as though it is inside my head. It’s a sound of anger and agony. Of pain, and a suffering I can’t possibly imagine.

Ronan’s eyes widen with a madness so deep I’ve not yet seen the extent of it, and my stomach clenches. I don’t know this version of him.

The Hatter.

The Mad Hatter.

His hands come closer. His fingers curl around something just out of sight, and it's as though he is squeezing my heart.

Then a hand grips my wrist and pulls, yanking me from the depths of the lake and back to the surface. A weight surrounds me. Coughing and spluttering, I kick and flail, unable to free myself. Then Ronan's face is inches from mine.

"You're all right, love," he says, his breath warm on my cheek.

I push away from him, treading water with heavy limbs. Waves of shivers roll through me and I gasp for air. "What ...?"

"The vision?" Ronan is still clutching my wrist. "Come on. We should get out of the water."

I don't argue, coughing again as I follow him to the shore. We emerge from the lake dripping, and I shiver as I squeeze as much water from my clothing as I can.

Ronan sits. He picks up a crystal that has fallen from the tree above and not made it into the lake. Moonlight splays off its fractals as he rolls it between his thumb and forefinger, and it's then that I see the tremble in his hand.

I settle onto the bank beside him and wait for him to speak.

I've already made him angry today, and after seeing the madness in his eyes in that vision, I don't want to ask anything that might make him look at me like that.

“The dagger,” Ronan finally says, glancing at my hip. “The memory you saw belongs to the dagger.”

“How can it have memories?”

“Just because it’s not alive doesn’t mean it can’t remember things.” He looks at me with a sad smile.

“That vision, do you ... remember the rest of it?”

“I didn’t,” he replies, taking a shaky breath. “Until now. But trust me when I say, I wish that dagger didn’t remember the things it’s done. I’m sorry you had to see me like that.” He pauses, his eyes glazed as though he is watching something far away. “The dagger shouldn’t be here. It should be in Wonderland.”

“What was it showing me exactly?” I ask.

Ronan looks out over the lake. He draws back his arm, then tosses the crystal in. It makes a small indent in the water’s surface. “Not one of my finer moments, that’s for sure.”

I hold my breath, trying to decide what I should ask next, or if I should ask anything at all.

“You’re carrying the Vorpall Sword,” Ronan says, before I can form my next question. “It’s the most powerful weapon in Wonderland. And the only thing that can control the Jabberwock.”

I suck in a sharp breath. “But you released the Jabberwock ... and the sword is here! Why?” I stare at him. “Why do you have the sword, Ronan? Why did you take it if it’s the only thing that can keep everyone safe from the Jabberwock?”

Ronan returns his gaze to me. “I didn’t know I had the vorpal sword. I don’t remember taking it.” Anger laces his voice again as he clenches his jaw and jumps to his feet. “But it’s something I would do, isn’t it? Because I’m the Hatter. I do stupid things. Things that get people hurt.”

“That’s not always true,” I say. “You came after me. You didn’t hurt me.”

“But I have, Alessa.” He runs his hand through his hair. “I’ve scared you, and intimidated you, and brought you into my world.”

“But I’m a part of your world, whether you like it or not.”

Ronan kicks the ground and the sand flies into the air in an arc. He turns his back to me, resting his hook and hand on his hips as he hangs his head.

“You know, it looks different in Wonderland. The sword.” His voice is a little calmer now. “It was in my bag when I first arrived here, so I assumed Wesley sent it with me. Although, I can’t imagine why he would have done that. And I don’t remember ...”

I get to my feet and brush the sand from the back of my damp coat. “I guess now we have another reason to get your key and return to Wonderland.”

Ronan pinches the bridge of his nose. “They should have predicted I’d do what I did. They should have stopped me. Time could have ...”

“What did Nerida mean when she said time is always on your side?” I ask, trying to draw him out of his own dark thoughts.

Ronan drops his hand to his side. “I have no idea.”

I chew the corner of my lip. “Before you found me, she also said that you need to use time wisely? Why all the time references? It must mean something.”

“How can I use my time wisely when I keep breaking it?”

I shake my head. “She didn’t say, use *your* time. Just time.”

Ronan closes his eyes and huffs a breath out between his teeth. “I really don’t know.”

“Nerida also said that the key does more than we think. That it’s the key to your heart. Does that mean anything to you?” I look at Ronan, but he doesn’t reply. He narrows his eyes. “Ronan? Did you hear what I said?”

“What did you say?” he asks.

How did he not hear me?

Ronan is looking straight at me, but it’s as though he didn’t comprehend my words.

“We have to get the key back,” I say. “It’s the—”

“I know!” Ronan yells. “What the bloody hell do you think I’ve been trying to do? But Cordelia, she’s too strong. Getting that key is impossible.”

“You don’t have to be stronger than her. You just have to be smarter,” I say. “Think, Ronan. How can we outsmart her?”

Ronan’s eyes glaze over and he stares through me. “Exactly where you need to go,” he mumbles. “Surely, she didn’t mean ...” Ronan glances around, his brow furrowed, then he stares past me again, into the trees behind us. “Make haste, Alessa. We have a pirate to outwit.” Ronan strides towards the forest that lines this section of the lake.

“Where are we going?” I ask, jogging to keep up with him.

He doesn’t answer, not that I can talk much anyway, running after him. We push through the trees, the occasional branch whipping my cheek, until we emerge from the tree line. Then we follow the edge of the lake, picking our way over the rocky shore until we reach a section of larger rocks. Ronan skirts around the base of the boulders, then steps up to a wall of vines and pulls them aside.

“A cave?” I ask, staring into the gaping black mouth.

“Not just any cave,” he says. “This is the entrance to the Time Tunnels. They can take us to any time and place in the past, so long as one of us knows where and when that is.”

“You mean, time travel? Can they take us to a time in Wonderland?” Excitement bubbles through me.

Ronan shakes his head. “These tunnels only work in Neverland. I’ve tried using them to get to Wonderland, but my magic can’t reach Wonderland from here. Still, we can travel back in time, in Neverland, to a place where we can get the key.”

I rub my temples, my head about to explode at the thought of time travel. But I guess, if places like Wonderland and Neverland can exist, why not believe in a time machine that exists inside a cave?

“Lucy,” I say, looking up and holding Ronan’s gaze. “I can’t just leave her. I’ve brought her to this crazy world. I can’t abandon her.”

“You’re not abandoning her,” Ronan says. “It will be as though we never left.”

I press my lips together, a stone forming in my stomach. “What if we don’t make it back?”

“We will.”

“Maybe I could go back to Cordelia’s cabin,” I say, still not entirely sure about gallivanting around through time. “I know exactly where the key is there.”

Ronan stares into the tunnel. “That’s too risky. We’ll be closed in. Our backs against the wall, so to speak.”

“Where do we go, then?” I ask. “Where can we take Cordelia by surprise?”

Ronan scratches his cheek with the tip of his hook, staring at his boots. Then he lifts his head and raises one eyebrow, his lips quirked into a cheeky smile. “Brawling Rocks. A moment after I fall on you through the doorway.”

I return his smile. “She won’t expect to see you so soon.”

“Looks like I’m going to win that fight after all.”

He holds his hand out. I glance at his beckoning fingers, then twine mine between them. His grip is firm but gentle, and I let Ronan lead me past the vines and into the darkness of the cave.

BE PREPARED

RONAN

The shadows of the tunnel surround us. I keep a tight hold of Alessa's hand and lead her a few paces in before stopping and drawing her close.

My anger at her for confronting Cordelia on her own has subsided, now replaced with a fear of losing her again. The Time Tunnels are not a place to get lost in.

"We have to be careful," I say. "We don't want to end up somewhere we don't want to be."

"Something we agree on," Alessa replies, and I can hear the smile in her voice. "But how do we know where to go if we can't see? It's so dark in here." She presses into my side and lays her hand on my chest.

"Don't think of anything but the darkness," I say. "Concentrate on that, and we'll be fine."

"What do you mean?"

"I mostly use this tunnel to get around the island faster. If I think of where I want to go when I first enter, I'll arrive there one second into the future, and because no one from the present has been to the future yet, the time shift is inconsequential. By the time my brain has caught up with the movement, everyone else has caught up, too."

Alessa's fingers grip my shirt. "Well, my brain is about to explode."

I chuckle, looping my hook arm around her so I can trail my fingers along the wall. "Best not to think about how it works. It just does. Come

on, this way. We have to find the access door to Time.”

“I’m getting a little sick of doors,” Alessa mumbles.

“This one is easy,” I say. “Well, if you’re me, that is.”

“How so?”

“I’m the only one who can open it. And before you ask, because I know how much you love to ask questions, it’s a safety measure. I can’t have anyone just flitting around through time, now, can I? Imagine what would happen if Pan could travel through time.”

“That makes sense,” Alessa says. “But I’m not entirely sure I want to flit around through time, anyway.”

“You’ll be perfectly safe with me.”

“Yes, you’ve said that before.”

I suppress a sigh and an answer, then gently nudge Alessa so we can move through the dark together. I count our steps. When I get to forty-two, I stop.

“Oh!” Alessa says, stepping on my foot.

“It’s all right, love.” I wriggle my toes in my boot, glad she can’t see my grimace.

I extend my hand into the darkness, and my fingertips brush the wooden surface of the door that leads to the heart of the Time Tunnels. I press my palm to it and a faint light seeps out around the edges, spreading over the surface until the entire door glows softly. I glance sideways at Alessa, her face illuminated by my magic. She’s beautiful.

“What now?” she whispers.

I pull my hand away, and the door dissolves, revealing the tunnel on the other side. Alessa puffs out a breath, her eyes wide. Up ahead is an archway, its shape formed by the dull light emanating from the room beyond. I loosen my hold on Alessa now that we can see. We continue on towards the arch, and I lead her through the entrance into the glowing room.

“Purple fire?” Alessa asks, gazing around the oval space at the four sconces evenly set on the wall.

“Magic fire,” I reply.

“Your creation?”

“This entire island is my creation.”

Alessa looks at the fire again. “How does this work?”

“We stand in the centre of the room.” I move into the space and beckon her to follow. “Then I think of when and where we’re going, and you tag along for the ride.”

“It’s that simple?” Alessa presses her hand to her skirt. An action she does often to check she still has the pocket watch.

“Yes ... and no,” I say. “We need to concentrate. The tunnels can be unpredictable, and you can’t let go of me. If you do, you might end up in a different time and place in Neverland.”

“I don’t want to get lost in time.” Alessa slips her hand into mine.

I give it a gentle squeeze and pull her closer. “I don’t want to lose you either.” I stare down at her, wanting so much to kiss her right now, but if I do, I won’t have a clear head. Travelling the Time Tunnels with other

things on my mind is not a good idea. “When we get there, stay behind me, all right, love?”

Alessa nods and worries at her bottom lip. “I want to help, though. If I can. What are you planning?”

“We’ll take Cordelia by surprise. If we appear a few seconds after I go through the doorway, she’ll be focused on that. She won’t expect me to reappear so suddenly.”

“You make it sound simple,” Alessa says. “I hope this works.”

“It will. As long as our other selves don’t see us, we’ll be fine.”

Alessa wrinkles her brow. “I don’t think we will ... did ... see ourselves, that is. We’d remember, wouldn’t we?”

“The one thing I’ve learned about time travel is not to think too much about how it actually works. It’ll send you mad, and I’m already mad enough. But yes, if we stayed on the same time line, we would remember. Which suggests we didn’t, so we don’t remember.”

Alessa shakes her head as though she’s trying to wrap her brain cells around our conversation. I grip her hand, take a deep breath, close my eyes so I can clear my head, then picture Brawling Rocks and my fight with Cordelia. If I can appear in front of her at the right moment, I can disarm her and get my key. I open my eyes again, and we head back into the tunnel. Alessa’s fingers tremble as we walk through the darkness, and I tighten my hold on her.

“The transition will happen quickly,” I say. “Be prepared.”

“I haven’t been prepared for any of this,” she mumbles.

With my fingers still clamped tightly around hers, I manoeuvre Alessa behind me and hold my breath as we walk, expecting to face Cordelia any second. My stomach churns as I realise I can't let go of Alessa, which means I can't draw my cutlass until we arrive in the past. With my hook raised, I press on.

Metal scraping on metal reaches my ears.

The air thickens.

Alessa gasps.

A door slams.

Then Cordelia is in front of me.

Her eyes widen. Releasing Alessa, I draw my weapon. Cordelia raises hers and I cut off her action, flicking my wrist in a circular motion, sending her cutlass flying. It lands in the sand, tip down, and wobbles.

Perfect! Good job, Ronan.

Voices behind us shout, but I advance on the captain of the *Crocodile*, pushing the tip of my cutlass into her sternum. She takes a hurried step back, holding her arms out from her sides.

I move closer, slipping the tip of my hook into the leather cord around her neck while keeping my cutlass in place.

"I believe this is mine." The stone in the key glows red. I yank my hook, snapping the leather.

Cordelia stumbles backwards and the key falls to the sand. Alessa dives past me and scoops it up, a blur of green glitter flying around her head. She shrieks and swats at Tinker Bell. Rose darts between Cordelia

and me, tackling Tinker Bell in the air. I extend my cutlass again, holding Cordelia back.

Metal clangs against metal.

“What the hell, Ronan?” Wendeline cries from behind me.

I retreat a few steps, still facing Cordelia, as Alessa stumbles to her feet and runs to my side. When I spin, my quartermaster is battling Gabe. She has him disarmed with the next flick of her wrist. He backs away as Wendeline retrieves his weapon.

“No time to explain,” I yell at Wendeline. “Alessa, let’s go!”

I run towards the southern end of Brawling Rocks, still clutching my cutlass. Then Alessa shrieks. By the time I stop and look back, Alessa is sprawled in the sand, the key just out of her reach.

Damn! It did seem too easy.

Cordelia pounces, but a pink and green streak hits the key before the pirate can reach it. Rose and Tinker Bell soar into the air, the key dangling from their grasp. Tinker Bell’s face reddens with the effort she’s putting into pulling on the leather cord.

“Let go!” Rose yells.

She opens her mouth and blows, sending Tinker Bell tumbling through the air. Then my ship faerie flits over to perch on my shoulder, clutching the key shaft tightly.

“Put that in here.” I open my coat with the tip of my hook and Rose drops the key into the inside pocket.

“Ronan!” Alessa yells, struggling to free herself from Cordelia, who now has her restrained.

Wendeline advances, her cutlass drawn. “Release her.”

For a split second, I’m proud that my quartermaster didn’t hesitate to defend Alessa, despite not knowing who she is yet and how important she is to me.

Cordelia laughs. “When Ronan gives me back the key.”

My gaze locks onto Alessa’s. She shakes her head, her eyes wide. She doesn’t want me to trade the key, but she knows I would give it up for her. I would give anything up if it meant I could keep her safe.

I slip my cutlass back into its scabbard and reach into my coat pocket.

“No!” Rose launches from my shoulder.

Seconds later, she hits Cordelia straight between the eyes, covering her face in a shower of pink glitter. The captain of the *Crocodile* staggers back, releasing Alessa as she coughs and swipes at her face. Rose attacks again, showering more glitter onto Cordelia. Alessa lurches forward, then finds her feet and runs towards me. I catch her in my arms as Rose lifts Cordelia into the air and carries her out over the water.

“Put me down, you stupid faerie!” Cordelia yells.

Rose’s tinkly laugh sounds into the Neverland night. She lets go, and Cordelia splashes into the Neversea. “Take that, you big wannabe mermaid.”

Gabe lumbers down to the shore. Tinker Bell flits towards us, then stops and scowls, but she doesn’t move back to the other pirates, as though she’s trying to decide what to do. Her inability to choose a side and stick to it is giving me whiplash, but this Tinker Bell hasn’t helped me down from the lighthouse yet.

“Don’t worry, Tink,” I say. “You come to your senses, eventually.”

She sets her tiny hands on her hips. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Let’s just say, Future Ronan has your back.” I wink, and her scowl deepens.

Cordelia splashes to the shore. “Tinker Bell!” she yells, fending off Gabe’s offer of assistance.

The green faerie flies over to them, and I pull Alessa towards the dinghy Wendeline and Past Me rowed here in. Wendeline follows, and we pile in, pushing out onto the Neversea with a little help from Rose. In minutes, we’re far enough away not to worry about Cordelia, and *Vengeance* looms in the distance.

“You’ve got some explaining to do,” Wendeline says, holding a cutlass out to me that looks identical to mine. Because it is mine.

“Keep it,” I say, resting my hand on the hilt of the cutlass hanging from my belt. “You’ll need to give it to me later.”

My quartermaster clutches the weapon, then gives Alessa a look over, her brow furrowed. “Time Tunnels?” she says, returning her attention to me.

“Yes, but don’t ask me questions about your future,” I say. “You know how this works.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.” She scowls at Alessa.

“Wendie, behave,” I scold.

“It’s okay,” Alessa says, smiling at Wendeline. “The other you doesn’t like me either.”

Wendeline's scowl deepens. Her gaze flicks to my breast pocket. "You finally got your key. Even if you fought dirty."

"That I did," I say, in answer to both remarks.

Alessa fidgets with the folds of her dress, her gaze darting around as she chews her bottom lip.

"You both look as though you've gone several rounds with Cordelia and then got abducted by mermaids." Wendeline crinkles her nose. "You could use a wash."

"We can see to that as soon as we board *Vengeance*," I reply.

Alessa fixes her roving eyes on me. "We're staying in the past?"

"For now. We could do with some rest."

"Isn't that ... dangerous?"

"Everything Ronan does is dangerous, in one way or another." Wendeline grins, and even though this version of my quartermaster hasn't gotten to know Alessa yet, I can still sense the same tension between them.

Alessa sits up straighter, her hand gripping the side of the dinghy. "What about Alice and Lucy? If we're in the past, where are they? How —?"

"Calm down, love," I say, trying my best to ignore Wendeline's glare.

"I saw Ronan go through that doorway," Wendeline says. "I'm assuming it's you he fell on top of."

"Aye, I did." I wink at Alessa and a blush creeps into her cheeks. "But it's all right. We know our future exists up until the point we went into the tunnels, which means what has already happened will still happen. Our other selves will do everything we've already done." I squeeze Alessa's

fidgiting hands. “Wesley will open his rabbit hole, and they’ll go to Wonderland. Even though time there has a way of running in every direction, we know that’s where they’ll be, so we’ll catch up to them eventually. We don’t have a set future past the moment we went into the Time Tunnels, so we have time to catch up. We can wait for this timeline to catch up to that timeline so we can get back onto the same timeline we were on before.” I raise my eyebrow. “Has your head exploded yet?”

“Several times. Is this what madness feels like?” Alessa uses her free hand to rub her temple.

“Aye. But this is also what sleep deprivation and hunger feel like,” I say. “We both need some sleep. Then we can decide what to do next. If we stay here or go back. But we won’t leave Lucy behind, I promise.”

The dinghy bumps into the side of the ship, and Wendeline reaches out to grab the rope ladder dangling down the side. She sets her foot on the first rung as I tie off the ropes. Alessa’s mouth droops and her eyes glaze over when she looks at the ladder. I offer her my hand to help her stand in the rocking dinghy.

“Want some help?” Rose asks. “The poor lass doesn’t look like she can climb a ladder.”

I nod, and Rose sprinkles her pink faerie dust over us as I gather Alessa into my arms, then fly us up to the main deck. I shoot Smee a hot glare before he can open his mouth and announce my arrival. He slinks away along the gunwale to a safe distance.

“Ronan, the key,” Alessa says, pressing her hand to my chest.

I tighten my arm around her and lead her towards my cabin. “We’ve waited this long, love. A few more hours won’t hurt.”

“But I have to tell you something.”

I kick the door open and lead her through, gently pushing her shoulder until she’s sitting on the bed. “It can wait.” I twirl a lock of her hair between my fingers. “You need to rest.”

Alessa lies on the bed and closes her eyes. “The key, it’s more important than you think.”

I pull the blanket over her. “We’ll talk about it in the morning.”

Her lips continue to move as she mumbles some words I can’t understand, then her breaths even out as she drifts off to sleep.

THERE ARE ALWAYS CONSEQUENCES

ALESSA

Warmth prickles my cheek, and I blink my eyes open, greeted by a stream of sunlight falling across my face. I'm sprawled on my belly, my head to the side, and when I move, my neck aches in protest.

How long have I been asleep?

Long enough to wake up stiff and sore from lying in the same position for a while.

I brush the hair from my face and take a deep breath. Salt and pine tingle my senses, and I breathe in again.

Ronan.

I'm in his bed!

I push myself to sitting, scanning the cabin, but he's not here. The memory of him putting me to bed surfaces, and either he slept beside me last night, or he sacrificed his bed for me. Heat creeps into my cheeks, and I'm glad he's not here to see.

I massage my neck, then rub my eyes, stifling a yawn. Two plates sit on the table, one containing the remnants of a meal and the other stacked high with pancakes, syrup, and berries. My stomach growls. I stand and stretch my arms over my head, my muscles sore in places I never knew existed, then I sit at the table and tuck into the pancakes.

When was the last time I ate?

When I'm done, I stand and grab an apple from the bowl. Juice runs down my chin as I bite into it.

The belt from my waist is gone, the weight of the vorpal sword absent from my hip. After losing it in the Neversea, Ronan probably won't want me to wear it anymore. I'm not sure I want to anyway after what I saw in the lake. My heart pounds for a moment as I check beneath my skirts, searching for the pocket watch, then I breathe a sigh of relief when my fingers find the edge of its familiar shape.

The key!

Ronan has the key now. I think back over last night. I tried to ask him about it, to tell him what I learned from Nerida, but Ronan insisted that I rest, and I fell into bed, exhausted.

We need to get moving so we can get to Wonderland and to Alice.

I need to know what will happen when the watch is wound. Will it fix itself? Will it send us to Wonderland? Open a doorway? What? I still don't know exactly how I've opened the doors in the past. But I *do* know the key and the timepiece are linked somehow. And not only to each other, but to Ronan as well.

I finish the last few bites of my apple, toss the core onto my dirty plate, then move to the cabin door. When I open it, I'm greeted by a shower of pink glitter as Rose bumps into my face.

"Oh, Alessa!" she cries. "I'm so sorry."

I cough and wave my hand in front of my eyes. "That's perfectly fine."

"I was coming to wake you, if you don't mind that is," the faerie says. "Ronan has been pacing the boards all morning. He's getting agitated. He's annoying when he's agitated."

“He’s annoying most of the time,” I say. “Why didn’t he wake me sooner?”

“He wanted you to rest,” she says, hovering at my shoulder as I step out of the cabin. “He ordered all of us to get some sleep, but now, he’s raring to go again.”

Rose moves closer, but seems to hesitate. Then I remember that this version of the tiny faerie only met me last night, and she doesn’t know me like her future self does.

“You can sit on my shoulder if you like,” I say, smiling.

“Thank you,” she squeals. She claps her little hands and takes up her familiar position. “Oh, and Tiger Lily is here,” Rose adds in a hushed voice.

“And that’s ... bad?” I whisper, walking onto the main deck.

“She likes to reprimand Ronan. A lot.”

I can’t imagine Ronan caring too much about anyone telling him off for something, let alone a tiny faerie.

On deck, the crew is busy around the ship, and a few members nod as I pass but still look at me as though I’m a stranger. I turn my attention to the quarterdeck, where I spot Tiger Lily standing on the railing, facing the helm.

The orange faerie has her back to the main deck, her hands on her hips, and her stance oozing authority. Add Ronan’s crossed arms and sheepish expression to the mix, and my guess is Tiger Lily isn’t happy.

“What’s this all about?” I mumble.

“Don’t worry.” Rose pats my cheek. “This is nothing compared to the last time Tiger Lily made a trip to *Vengeance*.”

My boots click on the steps leading to the quarterdeck. Wendeline stands to the side in her usual position. She scowls at me in her usual way, too, even though this Wendeline doesn’t know me yet. *Am I that unlikeable?*

Ronan moves his gaze to me, his expression shifting as he smiles and unfolds his arms. He runs his hand through his hair, his coat falling open to reveal his cutlass on one hip and the vorpal sword on the other.

I’m reminded that we’re in the past, supposedly living out a new present on another time line. It’s enough to give me another headache thinking about it.

Ronan rests his hand on the small of my back when I stand beside him. “Tiger Lily, this is Alessandria. Alessa, meet Tiger Lily. She’s the leader of the fae—”

“And a royal pain in Ronan’s ass.” The faerie offers me a smile.

“Actually, Tink is a pain in my ass,” Ronan says. “You. You’re just wonderful.”

“Stop trying to butter me up.” Tiger Lily crosses her arms and taps her foot, her gossamer wings vibrating at her back.

“I think you missed my attempt at sarcasm,” Ronan says.

“What’s happened?” I ask. “Because, clearly, I’ve missed something.”

Tiger Lily opens her mouth, but her words are drowned out by a deep rumbling. The deck boards shake, and *Vengeance* lurches over a huge

rolling wave, tossing her from side to side. I grab Ronan's arm to steady myself. The rumbling recedes and Tiger Lily narrows her gaze at Ronan.

"What I was about to say is that Ronan can't keep going on like he has been. His actions are so far beyond irresponsible that I can't even ..." The orange faerie purses her lips. "But we've already discussed this."

"At length," Wendeline mumbles.

"And now we need to *fix* it," Tiger Lily finishes.

"It didn't do that much harm." Ronan clenches his fist behind my back, tugging on my coat.

"I've warned you about using the Time Tunnels," Tiger Lily says. "There are always consequences. You can't keep creating more timelines. The magical fabric of Neverland can't sustain them. Have you even eaten any neverberries since arriving?"

"This is the reprimanding I mentioned before," Rose whispers in my ear.

"I had some for breakfast." Ronan leans around me and throws her a scowl. "In case you haven't noticed, I've been a little preoccupied until now."

"When are you not?" Wendeline scoffs.

"Neverberries?" I ask, frowning at Ronan.

He waves his hand. "It's a minor magic thing."

"Minor!" Tiger Lily screeches. "It's how this entire place exists! And you know you need to eat the berries regularly, otherwise you'll lose the connection."

"Connection?" I stare at the tiny orange faerie. "I'm so confused."

“Wait until we get to Wonderland.” Ronan winks at me.

“Focus, Ronan!” Tiger Lily says.

As confused as I am, everything Tiger Lily has said sounds bad. Ronan never mentioned any consequences to using the Time Tunnels. Just that if we weren’t careful, we could end up anywhere and anywhen in Neverland. Which I guess is a consequence, but one he assured me we were safe from.

“What else haven’t you told me?” I look up at him.

Ronan opens his mouth, but Tiger Lily beats him to it. “Travelling through the tunnels puts a huge strain on the magic in Neverland,” she says, launching off the railing and flying over to hover in front of us. “And to make matters worse, you haven’t returned to the point in the future where you left from, so now we have another timeline to deal with. To put it in layman’s terms, he broke stuff. Again.”

“It’s not that bad,” Ronan says.

“That’s what you used to say in Wonderland, and look where it got us!”

“You didn’t have to come with me, you know,” Ronan shouts, removing his hand from my back and stepping forward.

Tiger Lily moves, too, until she’s right up in Ronan’s face. “If we didn’t come, who would protect you from yourself?”

Ronan sighs and grips his hair with his fingers. “Don’t forget, you wouldn’t even be a faerie if it wasn’t for me. You’d still be a flower.”

“Actually, Tinker Bell made us faeries, not you.”

Ronan turns away and goes to the side railing, standing beside Wendeline to look out across the sea. She nudges his shoulder and looks up at him, a wordless exchange passing between them. I shouldn’t be jealous,

but my heart clenches at how they seem to have an unspoken understanding about everything, always leaving me on the outskirts of their shared knowledge.

Will I ever understand Ronan in the same way?

I approach Ronan and put a tentative hand on his shoulder. “How bad is it?”

He faces me, propping his elbow on the railing. “Bad enough for me to need to fix it as soon as possible. Which means we must stay here before we can return to the time we left.”

A faint red glow pulses beneath his shirt, and I drop my gaze to his chest. “The key ...”

“I know, love.” He fiddles with the key that’s now hanging from the leather cord around his neck, then stares back out over the water. “I hate to say it, but it has to wait. Neverland needs my attention first. Before it literally rips apart at the seams. If Neverland falls on this timeline, it might not be there when we return.”

“Another reason you should never have used the tunnels in the first place,” Tiger Lily grumbles.

Ronan throws her a stabbing glare. I worry at my bottom lip and shift my gaze back to his face, following his line of sight to where it rests on Wonderheart Lighthouse in the distance.

Wait? My stomach churns. After finally getting what we’ve been fighting so hard for, he wants to wait? I want to scream at him ... To hell with Neverland! Wonderland and Alice are more important.

But the sadness in his eyes, and the droop of his shoulders, stops me.

Instead, I say, “Can I help?”

He looks down at me, a small smile turning up the corners of his mouth. “With this? Not really. But having you by my side is help enough.”

Wendeline coughs, then moves away from us, stomping over to stand near the helm.

I swallow the lump in my throat, unsure if it’s one of sadness or fear. Sadness for not being able to get back to Alice as fast as I’d hoped. Fear of never getting there in the end. But I return Ronan’s smile, because he needs me, even if I don’t know why.

“Don’t worry,” he adds. “We have plenty of time. Almost two weeks passed here while we were only days in London. Alice won’t be in Wonderland yet.”

“Two weeks! We can’t wait that long,” I say.

Ronan works his jaw. “Wonderland isn’t going anywhere.”

But is Alice? What if we get there too late? Or too early?

I want to say it out loud, but I don’t. I simply nod and hold my smile in place. If someone told me losing Alice was the hardest thing I would ever have to do, I’d tell them they were wrong. Knowing where she is and not being able to get back to her and having to smile through it ... That’s the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do.

Why is Ronan doing this? It’s as though he changed the instant he had the key back.

“Nibs,” Ronan says, pushing away from the railing. “Set a course for Wonderheart.”

“Aye, Captain,” he replies. “Wonderheart!” he yells down to the crew, and they fly into a frenzy of organised chaos, turning *Vengeance* until her bowsprit faces the island in the distance.

“More wind in the sails, Captain Hook?” Rose asks.

“Aye, off you go.” He winks.

The faerie launches from my shoulder, flying up to the mainsail and working her magic. Tiger Lily hovers near us, her tiny neck craned so she can watch her sister as she coats the sails in her pink glitter. The ship surges through the water, and for a moment, I concentrate on the wind brushing my face so I don’t have to think about anything else.

“You ready to fly again, love?” Ronan asks. He hands me a small leather pouch, similar to the one he wears on his belt. “I think you’re ready to do it on your own.”

“What ...?” I take the pouch, knowing already what’s inside, but unsure why he’s giving it to me. So far as I know, he and Wendeline are the only members of the entire crew who have their own supply.

“Your own faerie dust,” Wendeline says, an edge to her voice. “Apparently, you’re *that* important. Who are you, anyway?”

“Wendie,” Tiger Lily says. “She’s Wesley’s daughter. She’s from Wonderland, so yes, Alessa is important.”

I gape at Ronan. “You told them?”

“Was I not supposed to?” He scratches his temple with the point of his hook.

“A good captain doesn’t keep secrets from his crew,” Wendeline says. “He’s told us everything that’s happened since he went through that door.”

I spin and face the pirate girl. “You mean, he doesn’t keep secrets from *you*. You forget, Wendie, that I know you far better than you know me, and if you did know me, then you’d also know that I have never done anything to warrant your treatment of me. I have always been nice to you. The least you could do is show me the same courtesy. It wasn’t Ronan’s secret to tell in the first place.” Anger rises inside me, pricking my skin from the inside. Why did Ronan think it was okay to talk about my personal affairs? Especially when I’m still reeling from the shock of discovering the truth.

“Are you done?” Wendeline snaps. “You want to know more about me, so we’re even? My father was a pretentious ass, and my mother was having an affair with the gardener. Get over it.”

Ronan steps between us. “Ladies, please. We have work to do.”

“No, *you* have work to do.” Wendeline grits her teeth. “You’re the one with the magic. So off you go.” She waves her hand at Ronan. “Go and fix what you’ve broken. Again.”

Ronan clenches his fist and works his jaw. “You have the ship while I’m gone. Anchor in Fae Refuge.” Then he turns and storms down the steps to the main deck.

Unsure what to do, because I’m mad at Ronan *and* Wendeline, I decide following Ronan is the lesser of two evils. He has the key now, which means I should probably forgive him so we can get on with it and get to Wonderland.

Vengeance slows as we gain on the lighthouse island, and Nibs steers the ship into the cove. Ronan stands in the centre of the main deck. Tiger Lily hovers at one shoulder and Rose at the other.

“Tiger Lily and I need to pop over to the lighthouse.” He fixes me with his stare. “We shouldn’t be long. Would you like to come?”

“You should say yes,” Rose whispers in my ear. “No one except Ronan and the fae are allowed to go to Wonderheart.”

I look into his dark eyes. “And then we can talk about the key?”

“I promise.” He puts his hook over his heart.

“No time to waste, then.” Tiger Lily darts to my hand and snatches the pouch of faerie dust, prising the drawstring open. She sprinkles the orange glitter over me, then fixes the pouch to my belt. Ronan coats himself with faerie dust as well, then kicks into the air. Tiger Lily follows.

He wasn’t kidding when he asked if I was ready to do this on my own.

“You’ll be fine.” Rose pokes my cheek. “Off you go.”

With a deep inhale, I stand with my feet slightly apart, bend my knees, then spring upwards. The air rushes over my face. I glance down, panic gripping my chest as the deck of *Vengeance* recedes.

What am I doing?

Tiger Lily appears beside me. “Don’t think too much, just fly.”

I glance at her. “Happy thoughts, right?”

“You got it.” She darts ahead.

Ronan is a dark splodge against the blue sky, but then his features come into focus as he soars towards me and circles around to fly at my side.

“You all right, love?”

“No,” I reply, dropping a few metres and letting out a small cry.

Ronan drops beside me and slips his hand into mine. “Happy—”

“Thoughts. I know. I’ll be all right when I can see Alice.”

“Which will be soon.” He tightens his grip on my hand.

We touch down on the island and Ronan releases me, striding towards the base of the lighthouse. The huge chess piece towers over us, the sun glinting off the glass sphere at the top. I stare up at the heart-shaped windows that circle the watch room, then focus on the lantern inside the glass ball. It’s an oddly familiar shape, but I can’t quite figure out what it reminds me of.

Ronan stops abruptly, staring at his feet, his eyes roving over the ground between where he stands and the wall of Wonderheart. There’s a crack in the earth wide enough for my foot to fit into and longer than Ronan is tall.

“When did it start?” He looks at Tiger Lily.

“I told you, while you were in the tunnels.” She glides over to Ronan. “Promise me it’s the last time.”

The rumbling we heard earlier onboard *Vengeance* starts again, and I stumble a couple of steps as the ground shakes. Ronan jumps back as the crack widens towards him. He doesn’t speak, promising Tiger Lily nothing. He frowns and scans the ground again, then walks to the lighthouse and presses his palm to the smooth surface. Light seeps from beneath it. Seconds later, one of the black squares swings open. He steps inside, and I hurry to where Tiger Lily waits at the opening.

I don’t ask if everything is all right, because I know it isn’t, but the way Tiger Lily presses her lips together and tilts her head suggests she senses my worry.

“It seems I can protect this place from the rest of Neverland, but I can’t protect it from Ronan,” Tiger Lily says. “Back home, his magic was ... unpredictable. It didn’t always work. But it works too well here, and as a result, he’s become careless. He built the tunnels to try to get back to Wonderland, and he nearly destroyed Neverland in the process. He knew this could happen again.” She darts inside.

I step into the base of the lighthouse to follow the man I thought I had come to know. But I don’t really know him at all. There are so many versions of Ronan—the Hatter, the pirate, the magician, the charmer, the risk taker—but when I try to piece them all together, they don’t fit properly.

My boots click on the polished black-and-white tiles as I climb the spiral stairs, wondering where *I* fit into all of this. Where do I fit into this jumbled mess of pieces?

I climb higher towards Ronan and the top of the lighthouse, feeling as though I’m trying to force a square peg into a round hole. Only Ronan is the peg, and the hole is my heart.

RESET

RONAN

The sound of Alessa's footsteps behind me reverberates off the tiled walls of the lighthouse. Part of me wishes I didn't have to come up here, that we could get on with finding our way to Wonderland. But another part of me is glad for the distraction.

Going home is something I've been trying to do for so long. What if this attempt fails as well? It will just be another disappointment that I don't want to face.

Tiger Lily darts past as I enter the lantern room, then she flutters near my shoulder, not one for actually sitting on it like Rose.

I push Wonderland and the key from my mind, stride across the chessboard floor, then stop and stare at the lantern that hangs in the centre of the space. A small gasp sounds from behind me, then Alessa's boots click on the tiles and she appears at my other shoulder.

"What ...?" Alessa's voice drops away. "You were not lying when you told me your hat was in a lighthouse."

"When have I ever lied to you?" I glance sideways at Alessa. "Actually, don't answer that. I've probably told a few white lies here and there."

Alessa regards me for a moment, a small smile playing at the corners of her mouth. She focuses on the lantern, her eyes filled with so many questions, and I brace myself for their onslaught, but she remains quiet.

The room is unfurnished, home to the power source of my version of Neverland. The hat floats in the centre of the space at my head height. It's currently emitting light—I can feel its magic prickling my skin—but it's invisible during the day. The fact it's still glowing is a good sign. I move around the hat until I'm facing Alessa with it between us. She watches me intently as I step towards it, scrutinizing the lantern.

"Why has it stopped spinning?" I mumble. "Ah! Here's the problem." I beckon Alessa to come closer.

She peers at the hat, squinting. "Where?"

"I see it," Tiger Lily says, her voice making Alessa jump. The faerie hovers near the hat's brim.

With my thumb and forefinger, I grasp the small thread that has come loose on the band of the hat. It has unravelled about a quarter of the way around.

"It's worse than last time," Tiger Lily adds. "I told you, if you mess with Time, he will mess with you."

"It's fine," I reply through gritted teeth.

Another white lie.

And there's a gigantic crack in the lighthouse island to prove it.

I can't deny that I secretly hoped travelling back in time would have no effect on Neverland. But using the Time Tunnels was a risk I was willing to take, and it paid off. I got my key back, but now I must deal with the consequences, as Tiger Lily so lovingly informed me. I'm just glad Alessa wasn't there to hear how mad she really was. She might be a tiny faerie, but she has a big presence.

“I told you before. It’s not *fine*, Ronan,” Tiger Lily says. “One day, you’ll break Neverland beyond repair. Then what?”

“It doesn’t matter,” I snap. “I won’t be here, so who cares? All I have to do is fix the problem long enough for us to figure out how to leave Neverland and get to Wonderland.”

“And what about everyone else?” She plants her hands on her hips, her wings beating frantically. “Pan can no longer sustain his part of the islands. He’s grown up too much, and the Nevertree in the Hideout is almost dead. What will happen when you’re not here to connect your magic to Neverland’s? What will happen to the others when Neverland crumbles out of existence because you’re too selfish?”

Alessa gasps. “We can’t let that happen. Ronan, you can’t.”

“Why not?” I ask, a little too loudly. “*I* saved everyone from Pan. *I* connected with Neverland’s magic, built new islands, planted a new Nevertree, and made this place far better than he ever did. Which means *I* can tear it down if I want to.”

Alessa takes a step back, shaking her head. “Are you mad?”

“Quite.” I grin. She stares at me in horror, her eyes and mouth wide. “Don’t be so dramatic, love. I’m not actually going to do it. I’ve put my heart into this place. I don’t want any harm to come to Neverland.”

Alessa glances at Tiger Lily, then back at me. “Are you ... feeling okay?”

I roll the thread between my thumb and forefinger. “Just dandy. Why wouldn’t I be?”

She hesitates, blowing a breath over her upper lip. “It’s just ... Well, which is it? Do you care, or do you not ... care?”

“About?” I look back at the thread on the hat.

“About anything!” Alessa throws her hands up. “One second, you don’t care about Neverland crumbling. That it doesn’t matter because you won’t be here. And the next, you say you won’t let anything happen to it.” Her breaths quicken, and she clenches her fists. “And ... and ... We fought so damn hard to get the key back from Cordelia, and now ... we’re standing here arguing—”

“You’re arguing, I’m listening,” I say.

“—about ... about.” She crosses her arms and huffs. “Can we please, just ... Fix what you have to fix so we can figure out how to get back to Alice?”

“Aye, love. As you wish.” I flash Alessa a grin, but she simply huffs again.

“I had a feeling this would happen,” Tiger Lily says at Alessa’s shoulder, but still loud enough for me to hear.

“What do you mean?” Alessa asks in a hushed voice.

“Whenever Ronan comes to the lighthouse ...” Tiger Lily puts her hand up to cover her mouth. “He regresses. He’s more Hatter when he’s here.”

Alessa glances at me, and I feign being busy with the thread, keeping my focus on it while watching her from the corner of my eye.

“Is that why he seems a little, you know ...” Alessa twirls her finger in the air around her ear. “Mad?”

“I can hear you, and see you,” I say, peering at them both around the hat.

“He knows he behaves differently up here.” Tiger Lily glares at me.
“Especially when he’s here to fix things.”

“Hang on,” Alessa says, taking a step towards me, her eyes wide.
“What did you say before?”

“Which part?” I ask.

“Your heart.” She rolls her hand through the air. “About ... putting your heart into it?”

“Into Neverland?”

“The key ... Nerida told me ...”

Alessa keeps talking, but her words morph into sounds I can’t understand.

Tick-tock.

Forget.

I scratch my head with the tip of my hook, trying to piece together what she’s saying. Tiger Lily darts between us, her mouth dropping open, then she claps her hands and smiles.

“Did you hear that, Ronan?” the faerie asks.

Forget.

Tick-tock.

“All I heard was a bunch of mumbo jumbo,” I say. “And you both think I’m mad.”

Alessa frowns. “I don’t think he can understand me.”

Tiger Lily flutters over and peers into my left eye. “It’s probably part of the curse.”

“Curse?” I raise an eyebrow. “What curse?”

“Never mind. Please get on with it, Ronan. We need to get out of here and clear our heads before we can figure out what to do next.”

“Aye, so how about you shut up and let me work?”

Returning my focus to the hat, I try to push all thought from my mind. I don’t want to think about what Tiger Lily said, and what will happen to my crew once I’m gone. Or whatever she means by a curse. Or about how the lighthouse affects me, bringing aspects of my old self that I’ve fought so hard to suppress to the surface. And I don’t think about how attractive Alessa is when she’s angry, or why she’s angry in the first place, because that’s one hundred percent to do with me and the Hatter.

Damn it!

What if, when we reach Wonderland, he comes back completely, and she doesn’t like him? What if, I drive her away, just like I’ve done with so many other people in my life?

It’s bound to happen. It always does.

I shake my head and squeeze my eyes closed for a moment, pushing the voice in my head away, then open them and stare at the hat. Magic seeps from my fingers into the thread, restitching it along the band of red fabric that surrounds the crown. The hat quivers, vibrating in the air, then slowly begins spinning again.

The floor of the lighthouse shakes. I stumble back a couple of steps. Alessa stumbles as well and I move towards her. She grabs my arm to steady herself. I slip my hand into hers and lead her to the edge of the room, the floor still trembling beneath our feet.

We stare out of the curved glass pane. The sky is awash with the colours of sunset. Pinks, oranges, and purples bleed into the rolling clouds that are moving faster than they should. The Neverland sun hurtles towards the horizon, as though it's being wound like a clock.

"What's happening?" Alessa whispers.

"The island is resetting itself."

The sky darkens as the sun disappears and the moon rises. The sun appears again, followed by the moon, then the sun. They spin and spin, days passing in mere seconds, until the moon comes to rest overhead, its glow illuminating the ground below. A rumble rolls beneath us as the crack closes, then all is still again.

My heartbeat thumps in my ears.

Moments pass, the quiet air hanging around us.

"Is that ... it?" Alessa finally asks. "All fixed?"

"Aye, all fixed." I stare into Alessa's eyes, which are still filled with so many questions. "Come on, we have a key to use." I tug her away from the glass towards the stairs that lead back to ground level, the lantern pulsing brightly as we pass.

Tick-tock.

Forget.

"Bloody hell," I mumble.

"Pardon?" Alessa says.

"Nothing." I squeeze her hand, then release her and walk ahead down the stairs.

The night air cools my face as I step out of the base of the lighthouse with Alessa and Tiger Lily in tow. I study the ground, walking a few paces across the island to check the crack really has closed. I take the key from around my neck and stop to face Alessa.

She walks towards me and I hold out my hand, my palm facing up, to offer her the key. The stone in the heart-shaped bow glows red as she approaches, her gaze dropping to my hand. Alessa reaches out, and I resist the urge to pull away, to put the key around my neck again. It's taken me so long to get it back, and now I'm about to hand it over to someone else.

Alessa touches the key with her fingertips, then gently picks it up and stares at it. She slips her other hand into her skirts and pulls out the pocket watch.

"What will happen when I wind it?" she asks.

I shrug, dropping my arm to my side. "The only way to know is to try."

"Perhaps we should go somewhere else," Tiger Lily says. "If that key takes you back to Wonderland, you'll want to say goodbye to everyone first."

Alessa makes a fist around the key, then holds my gaze. "Wendeline. She'll want to see you before you go."

I scoff. "She'll be happy to see the back of me."

Alessa laughs, but the sound is humourless. "You really are stupid, aren't you?" She returns the timepiece to her pocket, then slips the leather holding the key over her head and tucks it into her blouse. She dips her fingers into the pouch I gave her and sprinkles herself with faerie dust.

I raise my eyebrow. "You enjoy insulting me, don't you?"

“Only when you deserve it.” Alessa springs into the air and soars out over the cliff towards *Vengeance*.

“Look who’s filled with confidence now,” I mumble, kicking off the ground and following her.

“She’s right, you know,” Tiger Lily says at my shoulder.

“About what?” I push to gain on Alessa.

“Wendie will want to see you. But she won’t want to say goodbye.”

I roll onto my side in the air and study Tiger Lily. “What in Neverland do you mean? I drive Wendie crazy. She won’t care if I’m gone.”

Tiger Lily purses her lips. “Are all men as dense as you? Of course she will care! Wendie loves you.”

I frown, then grumble, “She has a funny way of showing it.”

I catch up to Alessa. She glances across at me, then we touch down on the main deck of *Vengeance* together, her landing a little wobbly.

“Captain on board!” Smee yells.

The crew cry a collective, “Aye, Captain,” but I don’t bother telling Smee to put his cap in it this time. Instead, I glance up at Wendeline where she stands on the quarterdeck and nod towards my cabin. She sets her jaw, and her eyes are dark, but she heads for the stairs.

I grab Alessa’s hand and pull her towards the door that leads from the main deck into my part of the ship. By the time Alessa and I are inside, Wendeline is right behind us. Rose and Tiger Lily dart into the room, too.

“How bad was it?” Wendeline asks, moving to the far side of the cabin and leaning against the wall. “The reset was at least a few days this time.”

“Almost a week,” Tiger Lily says. “Neverland is fine for now. But I strongly advise you not to use the Time Tunnels again.” She glares at me. “It puts too much strain on your magic.”

“Aye, duly noted.” I turn to Alessa. “Let’s see what the key does.”

She reaches into the folds of her skirt and brings out the pocket watch, then pulls the leather cord over her head and rests the key on her palm. Alessa turns it over a few times, running her thumb along the shank. The stone in the bow glows brighter at her touch.

Alessa takes a deep breath as she flicks the back cover of the pocket watch open. With shaky fingers, she slips the pin into the hole in the centre of the heart, then winds it, the cogs eliciting a small click with each turn.

I grit my teeth, unsure what to expect, and afraid the timepiece might explode.

It wouldn’t be the first time a pocket watch has exploded in my presence.

“It won’t go any farther.” Alessa removes the key from the hole and closes the case. She turns the pocket watch over and stares at the face, her brow creasing. “Nothing’s happening.”

I stand at her side and look over her shoulder. The hands are stuck at six o’clock, like they have been since the pocket watch broke. But the face is different somehow.

“The crack,” I say. “It’s gone.”

Alessa runs her finger over the glass. “But it’s not working. I wound it all the way. It should tick, shouldn’t it?”

I tap the face with the tip of my finger. “Aye, clocks usually tick.”

Alessa closes her fingers around the pocket watch. “This is useless. I want to go to Wonderland.”

Light streams from between Alessa’s fingers and she jumps, fumbling the timepiece and almost dropping it. The faeries and Wendeline crowd in to look as Alessa cups the pocket watch in her palm. The face glows and the hands spin frantically in both directions—so fast they become a blur—then they stop at six o’clock again and the light fades.

“What was that all about?” Rose asks.

Alessa turns the pocket watch over and over, studying it. “Who knows? Nothing has changed.” She drops her arms to her sides.

“That’s not exactly true,” Wendeline says. “Look.”

I follow her pointing finger across the room. Rose squeals, Tiger Lily shrieks, and Wendeline takes a step closer, narrowing her eyes.

“I honestly don’t know how I do that,” Alessa says, staring at the door that now stands on my bed. She tucks the timepiece away and puts the key back around her neck.

“I think,” Tiger Lily says, darting to the door, then back to Alessa, “that after you wound the watch, you told it what you wanted. To go to Wonderland.”

“Do you think Wonderland is on the other side of this door?” Alessa whispers, leaning against me.

“I bloody well hope so,” I say.

“Well, there’s only one way to find out.” Alessa crosses the room, climbs onto the bed, then curls her fingers around the mushroom handle and opens the door.

BELIEVE THE UNBELIEVABLE

ALESSA

It's dark on the other side of the door. I squint into the blackness to try to make out what I'm looking at. A bird cries, *never, never*. Wind rustles leaves. I hold my breath and listen for more sounds, sweat slicking my palm where I grip the door handle.

The longer I stare at what's on the other side, the more details come into focus. Trees. A dirt path.

Ronan steps up beside me, the bed dipping under his weight as his shoulder brushes against mine.

"Does it look like Wonderland?" I ask.

"Hard to tell," he says, peering through the opening. "It doesn't feel like Wonderland."

Before I can reply, Ronan steps through, his boots crunching leaf litter. He glances left, then right, then turns in a circle until he's facing me.

"This is the Wandering Woods. It's like a sister forest to the Whispering Woods in Wonderland." He scratches his temple with the tip of his hook. "We're still in Neverland, but there must be a reason the pocket watch led us here. Come on you lot."

Ronan steps back as Rose and Tiger Lily dart through the door. I glance over my shoulder at Wendeline, then step to the side so she can climb onto the bed and get past me. She doesn't thank me on her way, but then I didn't expect her to. I follow the others, pulling the door closed behind me.

The woods are dark and eerie. I catch glimpses of the full Neverland moon between the canopy, its light shining off leaves and rocks as the trees move with the wind. A rich, earthy smell seeps into my nose, and the air dampens my skin. A breeze brushes my arms, sending a chill up my spine.

Never, never.

I jump at the cry of the Neverbird, moving closer to Ronan so I can slip my hand into his.

“There’s no need to be afraid, love,” he says. “Nothing in the woods can hurt you.”

“That’s reassuring,” I reply.

“You’re wrong,” Wendeline says from Ronan’s other side. “I can hurt you.” I look around Ronan at the pirate girl. She flashes a smile, then laughs. “Relax, Alessa. I’m teasing.”

I puff out a breath, remembering the last time I came up against a female pirate in Neverland. I didn’t stand a chance then, and I wouldn’t against Wendeline now.

Pushing thoughts of fighting pirates from my mind, I ask, “Why do you think the door opened here?”

Ronan leads me along the path. “Up ahead is the Hollow Walk of Doors. Or at least, a recreation of them.”

“That sounds ... creepy.” I tuck myself closer to his side.

“We have many doors in Wonderland,” Ronan says. “I tried to recreate the Hollow Walk here in an attempt to get home, but it didn’t help. These doors don’t work for me, but maybe you could try.”

We continue on through the gloomy darkness, the orange and pink glow from Tiger Lily and Rose's glitter lighting the way, until the path widens and the tree trunks thicken. Leaves crunch underfoot, and the Neverbird cries again. Feathers rustle through the trees as it takes flight.

"Where have the doors gone?" Wendeline asks, turning in a circle as she walks ahead.

Ronan stops, then goes to the nearest tree. Its trunk is huge. So big that the three of us wouldn't be able to hold hands and circle it together. He loops his hook over a vine and pulls, the plant coming away with a rustle and snap.

"They're here," he says, releasing my hand to grab another piece of vine. "They're just overgrown."

Wendeline follows Ronan's lead, going to the next tree and pulling at the vines and plants growing on the trunk until a door is revealed. Ronan continues to hack with his hook. Wendeline uses her cutlass, and I help as well. By the time we have four doors exposed, stinging cuts cover my hands, I'm panting, and a trickle of sweat runs down my spine.

Each door is an irregularly shaped polygon with chains of roses around their frames. So far, my doors have been the usual rectangle shape, and the haphazardness of these is startling. The first has a heart carved into the centre. Ronan grabs the handle and I hold my breath as he pulls the door open.

There's nothing on the other side but wood.

"Good to see that hasn't changed," he mumbles.

Wendeline opens the next door, its frame adorned with the clubs symbol from a pack of cards, and we're greeted by the same result. The

third door has a diamond carved into it, and when Ronan opens it, all we see is wood again.

I approach the fourth door, running my fingers over the spade carved into the rough surface. The handle fits snugly into my palm, and I hold my breath again as I twist. When I open it, my breath puffs out between my lips. On the other side is a lush green field, the tall grass swaying in a gentle breeze. A glittering castle sits in the distance, nestled at the base of snow-capped mountains.

“Damn!” Ronan says at my shoulder. “There’s nothing there.” He grabs the edge of the door and slams it shut, jolting it from my grip.

“Nothing there?” I ask. “You didn’t see ...?”

But I don’t finish my question. I run back to the first door, grab the handle, and pull. On the other side is a courtyard lined with rosebushes and a heart-shaped fountain at the centre. I leave it open and run to the second door. Another image greets me, of a forest with glowing plants and oversized flowers.

“Alessa, what are you doing?” Ronan puts his hand on my arm.

My fingers cramp from holding the doorhandle. “Look.” I point through the door.

“There’s noth—” But Ronan stops once he’s turned his head. “How?”

“Can you see it?”

“That’s Glowing Grove. It’s not far from the Tea House.” Ronan frowns. “Why didn’t I see it before?”

“See what?” Wendeline stands at his other side.

“I don’t see anything either?” Rose flits over and lands on Ronan’s shoulder. “Oh!” she cries. “I see it! I see it!”

“How?” Ronan asks.

Tiger Lily alights on Ronan’s arm. “I can see now, too. Alessa. We’re all connected to her.”

“I’m not,” Wendeline scoffs.

I reach behind Ronan and grab her upper arm. “Now look.”

She scowls, then focuses on the doorway. “Is that Wonderland?”

“Part of it,” Ronan says.

“Well, what are you waiting for?” Wendeline shrugs out of my grasp and walks away. “Now’s your chance to leave.”

I glance over my shoulder. She has her back to us, standing in the middle of the path with her head tilted to the sky. The Neverland moon peeks through the canopy, and when she glances back at us, I catch a sparkle in Wendeline’s eyes. I hold her gaze for a moment, her heartache on display. Then she scowls and looks at her feet.

“Come with us,” I say, letting go of the door and going to Wendeline. I stand in front of her, silent until she looks up. “You could come?”

She shakes her head. “I don’t belong in Wonderland. I don’t belong anywhere.”

“Wendie.” Ronan joins us, a faerie on each shoulder. “What would I do without my second in command?” He raises one eyebrow.

“We can’t just leave the rest of the crew,” she says.

“We’ll come back for them.” He smiles.

Wendeline is quiet for a few moments. The forest around us sighs as we wait for her to speak.

“I guess someone needs to keep you out of trouble,” she finally says.

“Aye,” Ronan replies, then turns back to the door. “And there’s plenty of trouble in Wonderland.” He takes my hand and we step forward. “Ladies first, Alessa.”

My palms sweat, and I want to let go of Ronan, but if I do, no one else will be able to see what’s on the other side of the door. I wipe my free hand on my skirts, then press my palm against the wood of the door. Glowing Grove returns.

“We just ... walk through?” I ask.

“That’s usually how doorways work,” Wendeline says.

I stare at the glowing flowers that line the edge of an iridescent clearing, wondering if Alice has been here before. Of course she has. She’s been everywhere in Wonderland.

“Alice,” I say, turning to Ronan. “She won’t be there yet. How do we even know she’ll get there? We’re in the past. And what about Lucy? I can’t leave her in ... our other present?”

Ronan sighs. “We’re in Neverland’s past, not Wonderland’s, so Wonderland currently has one timeline. There are no Time Tunnels there, so no possible way for anyone to do what we’ve done. All we have to do is wait for everyone to catch up. I think ...”

“You think?” I worry at my bottom lip. “Even our other selves? My head hurts.”

“That’s because you’re trying to explain something that can’t be explained. Stop trying to make sense of things that don’t make sense. It’s far easier to believe in the unbelievable than to explain the unexplainable.” Ronan grins.

“Can we get on with it?” Wendeline asks.

“Right.” I turn back to the image of Glowing Grove, trail my fingers over the wood to the open doorway, then try to poke my hand through, but it’s as though there’s a pane of glass there. The air shimmers out from my touch, like ripples on a pond. When they reach the doorframe, a succession of clicks sound, like cogs turning, and a keyhole appears where the handle would be if the door was closed.

Wendeline chuckles, but there’s no humour in it. “I don’t suppose anyone has the key?”

I stoop to study the lock embedded in the glass. “I do,” I mumble. “It’s the same shape as the pocket watch key.”

If I take my hand off the door, will Wonderland disappear again? It seems I have to be touching it to be able to see what’s on the other side.

“Ronan, could you?” I glance at where our hands are linked.

“Aye, love.” He releases me and sets his hand on my shoulder instead.

I pull the leather necklace over my head, then slip the key into the glass keyhole. When I turn it, the image of Wonderland ripples again, my hand that’s pressed to the glass slipping through the doorway.

Ronan lets out a harsh breath. “You did it, love.”

I glance at him and smile. “Time to go home.”

He squeezes my shoulder, then I step through. The air is light and breezy, like a warm breath tickling my skin. Ronan's hand trails from my shoulder down to my wrist. Then his fingers are gripping mine so tightly they ache. Rose shrieks, and when I turn, she darts from Ronan's shoulder, latching on to the tip of my finger.

The faerie slips through as my hand slides from Ronan's grasp. His eyes widen and he yells, but I can't hear him. He pounds on the now solid barrier between us with his fist, and stares at me with panic in his eyes. But his focus is all over the place, as though he can't see me anymore.

"What just happened?" I whisper, my pulse racing in my ears.

Rose flits to my shoulder. "The door wouldn't let him through."

"No." I press my palm to the barrier. "Where's the keyhole? How do I get back? Rose! How do I get back?"

Rose clings to my hair. "I ... don't know."

Ronan's shoulders slump, and he moves away from the door. Wendeline touches his arm, but he shrugs her off. Hot tears track down my cheeks as I run my fingertips over the barrier and search the doorway again for a keyhole. For anything that will let me go back through.

Then Ronan, Wendeline, and Tiger Lily fade until all I can see is darkness.

A BUNCH OF NONSENSE

RONAN

My breaths come hard and fast as I stare at the tree. The door is still open, but where there should be an entrance to Wonderland is nothing but the rough bark of the tree's trunk. Why couldn't I walk through with Alessa?

"What the bloody hell is going on?" I shout, spit flying from my mouth.

I lunge forward, my fist clenched, and punch the open doorway again and again. Pain blooms in my hand and shoots up my arm. When I finally stop, blood runs over my knuckles. It's almost black in the Neverland night.

"Why?" I ask, gripping the edge of the open door and hanging my head.

I turn away from the tree, slamming the door, and move to the middle of the path. Wendeline comes to my side. She touches my arm, and this time I don't shake her off. She doesn't speak, and the silence between us weighs heavily on my heart.

"What am I supposed to do now?" I ask, staring at my boots.

Tiger Lily flies over and lands on the ground at my feet. She looks up with her big, round eyes. "We wait for Alessa to come back."

I laugh, even though it's not funny. "And what if she never comes back?"

“She will,” the faerie says. “Alessa told me everything Nerida said while they were under Marooner’s Rock. She’ll do everything within her power to get back to you. We know why you can’t get home, even if we can’t tell you.”

“What do you mean, can’t tell me?” I ask.

“It’s part of the curse.” Tiger Lily launches into the air and I raise my head to look at where she hovers before me. “We’ve tried explaining, but there’s something stopping you from hearing us.”

“What did Nerida share?” Wendeline asks. “Because I’m not sure if I trust her.”

“Well, you can trust me. I wasn’t privy to everything that went on in Wonderland. It’s not easy to be in the know about certain things when you’re rooted firmly to the ground most of the time, but everything she said makes sense. Neverland won’t let Ronan go.”

“Why the bloody hell not?” I ask.

Tiger Lily’s eyes widen. “Did you hear me say that?”

“Of course I did,” I growl. “Why won’t Neverland let me go?”

“Because you ...”

Forget.

Tiger Lily’s voice trails off, then comes in fits and starts, the sounds she’s forming making no sense. I squint and study her lips, but have no idea what she’s saying.

“Well, that’s interesting,” Wendeline says. “So Ronan ...”

Then Wendeline’s words do the same thing, morphing with Tiger Lily’s until all I can hear is a drone of incomprehensible sound.

“Stop.” I press my hand over my ear. “You’re talking a bunch of nonsense.”

Wendeline raises her eyebrows. “Which part didn’t make sense?”

“All of it.” I glare at her. “I understood nothing after Tiger Lily said Neverland won’t let me go.”

Tiger Lily goes quiet, pressing a tiny finger to her chin. “Let me try something.”

She flits over to the edge of the path and returns with a small twig. Wendeline and I crouch as Tiger Lily scratches something in the dirt. I tap my temple with my hook, tilting my head to see better. The faerie has drawn a key with a heart-shaped bow.

“Is that my key?” I ask.

“Yes.” Then Tiger Lily draws an arrow pointing to a heart. “And this is your heart.”

“What does it mean?”

“Alessa said, the key ...”

Forget.

Tiger Lily’s voice fades, even though I can see her lips moving. I strain my ears, but I still can’t hear her voice. It’s as though there is a vacuum in my head where all sound has been sucked away.

“The key ... what?” I ask, as the sounds of the forest rush at me.

“You didn’t hear what I said?”

“I did,” Wendeline says.

She stands and walks a few paces along the path, stopping at the door Alessa stepped through and turning to face it. “We have to get Alessa back.

She has the key.”

“And how do you suppose we do that?” I run my hand through my hair, defeat settling into my stomach.

“Believe the impossible, and the impossible becomes believable,” Tiger Lily says, her voice rising an octave. “Did you hear that?”

“Of course I did,” I scoff. “It’s one of the fundamental rules of Wonderland.”

“We just have to get him to remember,” Wendeline says.

“Remember what?” I raise my eyebrow.

“Yourself,” Tiger Lily adds. “Wonderland.”

I look from my quartermaster to the faerie. “I remember Wonderland. I was bloody born there.”

“This is going to be difficult if we can’t tell him exactly what Nerida told Alessa.” Wendeline looks at Tiger Lily.

“We definitely need Alessa,” the faerie replies. “She can help him fix it.”

I squeeze my eyes closed and pinch the bridge of my nose. Yes, I need Alessa back, but as for what they’re on about with me believing in myself and Wonderland and getting home ... I already do. How would I be able to use my magic if I didn’t? How would I know Wonderland exists if I didn’t believe in it? What the hell am I thinking? I’m *from* Wonderland, of course I believe in the damn place and everything about it.

“Help me fix what?” I ask.

“Your heart?” Wendie says.

“What?”

She turns to me. “Did you hear that?”

I rub my chest to ease the hollowness there. The feeling that I’ve mostly forgotten about because it’s been with me for so long.

Forget.

“You said my heart.”

Wendie studies me. “It’s broken.”

“My heart?”

Forget.

“Maybe he can understand if we talk in broken snippets,” Tiger Lily says, darting between Wendeline and me.

I blow out a harsh breath, then go to stand beside Wendeline in front of the door Alessa went through. “Let’s concentrate on Alessa first,” I say. “If she ended up in Glowing Grove, she won’t be far from Tea House and Wesley’s burrow. If she can find him, she can get help. He’ll know how to send her back, since he had a part in sending me to Neverland in the first place.”

But that’s only *if* she can find him. Or if she would even want to after what she learned about him recently.

Wendeline leans into my side, her shoulder brushing mine. “What should we do?”

It’s a simple question, but one I can’t answer. Dread settles into the pit of my stomach, as heavy and painful as a stone wrapped in daggers.

“I have no idea what to do, other than wait,” I reply.

“We can’t wait forever.”

“But we can wait awhile.”

Tiger Lily settles on a branch above and to my left, staring down at us. “If you want to wait, then we’ll wait.”

I glance up at the faerie. I could use the Time Tunnels to go back and stop Alessa going through to Wonderland, but Tiger Lily would never allow it. I’d probably make more of a mess than we’re already in, and the thought of eating more neverberries makes my stomach churn.

If we leave the Hollow Walk, and Alessa comes back, we won’t know, and she won’t know where we are.

Waiting seems to be the only thing we *can* do. But with no clue what’s happening to Alessa, how long should we wait for her? Like Wendeline said, we can’t stand here forever.

I grasp the doorhandle and pull it open. For a split second, I hope to see something on the other side, but all that greets me is the trunk of the tree. I step up to it and press my palm flat on the wood.

Remember myself. Remember Wonderland.

But how do I remember something if I’ve forgotten it? How do I know I’ve forgotten something if I’ve forgotten?

As much as I hate the place, Wonderland *is* my home, and I’ve tried so hard to get back there.

What am I missing?

The wood beneath my fingertips hums and I hold my breath. But nothing happens. The doorway reveals nothing. I drop my arm, turn and press my back to the tree, then slide down until I’m sitting in the open doorway. I pull my knees up and rest my forearms on them, picking at my fingernails with the tip of my hook.

Wendeline sits beside me, her legs crossed, and draws in the dirt with her fingertip. I watch from the corner of my eye, not exactly sure what she's drawing. It seems to be just a random continuous squiggle. Her eyes glaze over as her hand moves back and forth, as though she is far away somewhere deep in thought.

Then the lines she's making start to form shapes. I drop my knees and lean forward, staring at what Wendeline has inscribed in the dirt.

"Wendie," I say. "What ... Have you been to Wonderland?"

"You know I haven't," she says. "Why?"

She looks down at her handiwork, her finger still moving through the dirt. At first glance, it's a bunch of haphazard lines going in every direction, but I can see so much more.

"You've drawn Wonderland," I say.

She frowns, stilling her hand. "Really? It's just squiggles, Ronan. A way to pass the time."

"No, look." I put the tip of my hook in the centre of the mess of lines. "Here's the Heart Castle, and the Ice Mountains behind it." I get onto my knees and lean over the drawing, more of Wonderland coming to life before my eyes. "And here are the Whispering Woods, with Glowing Grove, and Tea House." I wave my hook over another part of the drawing. "You've drawn a map of Wonderland."

"I see nothing but lines." Wendeline gets to her feet and brushes her hands off on her pants.

Tiger Lily comes down from the tree. "What else do you see, Ronan?"

Before I can answer, the ground rumbles and I lurch forward, my hand and hook smearing Wendeline's drawing as I fall onto it. The open door shakes beside me, swings towards me, then knocks me away. It slams shut. Vines grow from the ground and between the tree's roots, snaking up, over, and around the door until it's completely covered. I push myself to my feet and run along the Hollow Walk of Doors, only to find that all four of them have disappeared, covered by thick vines and leaves.

"No!" I yell, returning to the tree holding the door Alessa went through.

"What's going on?" Wendeline asks. "Why have the trees covered the doors again?"

Tiger Lily flits around, dropping orange glitter in her wake. "Neverland is making sure Ronan stays here."

"How do you know?"

The ground shakes again. Wendeline stumbles into me. A crack sounds into the night, and Tiger Lily darts in front of us. When I look up, she has a branch suspended in her glitter mere inches above our heads.

"That's probably one way to tell," I say.

I find the patch of dirt where Wendeline had been doodling. Was I on to something? It's as though the answer is there, but it's just out of reach, hiding behind a corner where I can't quite see it. But if I could see Wonderland so clearly in a mess of lines in the dirt, why shouldn't I be able to see it on the other side of these doors?

"Believe in the impossible," I mumble. "Remember."

Forget.

I step up to the tree and hack at the vines with my hook.

“What are you doing?” Wendeline asks.

“Alessa can’t come back through if the door is covered,” I say. “And I want to see Wonderland again.”

Wendeline presses her lips together and nods, then wraps her hands around a vine and pulls. We work in silence. Even Tiger Lily helps where she can, until the rough wood of the door appears beneath the tangle of leaves and twisted branches.

I stop and lean on my knees, panting to catch my breath. When I straighten and reach for the doorhandle, the vines snap and creak, growing over the door again.

Wendeline sighs when I get straight back to clearing them away, but she helps without protest. I don’t care if we have to stand here for the rest of the night, and all day tomorrow, and every day and night after that, to keep the vines at bay. I’ll do it until I can see Wonderland and Alessa again.

This time, when the vines are cleared away enough for us to get the door open, I don’t hesitate. I grab the handle and pull.

Please be there.

My heart sinks when all that’s revealed is wood.

The vines grow over again, and again we work to clear them.

I lose track of how many times we do it, but I refuse to give up. Wendeline and Tiger Lily don’t complain, and I’m grateful for their support and presence, even though after a while, I withdraw into myself as though there is no one there but me.

My fingers and palm are bloody and scratched, my nails jagged and torn, the tip of my hook blunt. Sweat runs down my face and into my eyes. I clutch the doorhandle, steady my breathing, and focus on what I want to see on the other side of the door when I open it.

Because if I *can* see Wonderland again, then I'm one step closer to Alessa and getting home.

THE MOST IMPORTANT PART

ALESSA

Frantically, I press my hands to the barrier that separates me from the others.

There has to be a way back through.

I keep searching, but the tree I stepped out of grows bark over the door, covering it as though it was never there. Leaves rustle as vines wrap themselves around the trunk and glowing flowers burst open.

“No,” I puff out between my lips, staring up the expansive trunk into the branches above. “Rose, we must open it again,” I say, a little louder.

“You can’t,” someone says from behind me. “One-way door.”

I recognise the voice, and when I turn to face Wesley, I can’t decide if I’m happy to see him, or still angry that he abandoned Alice and me. That he never came back to see his daughter. Not once.

“One-way?” I ask, pretending I don’t know him. “How ridiculous. Doorways should go in both directions.”

Wesley grins. “Of course it’s ridiculous.” He bows and spreads his arms wide. “Welcome to Wonderland.”

Pink streaks through the air and Rose smacks Wesley in the face as he straightens. “How could you!” she shrieks.

Wesley takes a step back, coughing and waving his hand through the cloud of glitter in front of him. “How could I what?”

“You banished him.” Rose pokes Wesley in the cheek, then flits away before he can grab her. “Instead of helping him, you sent him away.”

“Who are you? What are you talking about?” His voice quavers.

“Don’t pretend you don’t know.” I glare at Wesley. “You know Neverland is on the other side of that door.” I glance back at the tree where there’s no sign of the doorway left. “And you know Ronan is trapped there.”

Wesley straightens, adjusting his waistcoat, then he makes eye contact with me, his smile faltering. “Anywhere can be on the other side of that door. But I see Ronan has made some friends.”

“You bet your whiskers he has, you backstabbing, no-good ball of fluff,” Rose says.

“Have we met before?” Wesley wrings his hands and studies the faerie, taking another step back.

“I’m Rose.” She flits towards him. “Remember? You sent me with him. I used to be a flower.”

“He’s creating faeries now?”

“Send us back,” I demand, ignoring his question. “Or better still, bring Ronan home.”

“I can’t do that. No, no.” Wesley shakes his head, his gaze flicking every which way. “Tell me how you opened a door to Wonderland.”

Until now, his voice has been nervous and timid, so I start at the force behind his words. “I don’t have to tell you anything,” I counter.

“Then I’ll take you to the Queen.” He stands taller and stares down his nose at me. “She doesn’t like intruders.”

“I’m not an intruder,” I say. “I’m ...” But I don’t continue. He doesn’t know that I know he’s my father and that Wonderland is in my blood, and things are complicated enough at the moment without addressing that particular issue. “Please. The Queen doesn’t need to know we’re here,” I continue, changing tack and taking a tentative step forward.

“Be careful,” Rose whispers from her perch on my shoulder. “You can’t trust him.”

No. But maybe he can tell me how I open doorways.

He is my father, after all.

“Please,” I say again, hoping Wesley will reply with something that will help, but he simply frowns and waves his hand in a circle to hurry me up. “I know Ronan was banished to Neverland for a reason. And I know you had something to do with it. But I also know that Wonderland is in danger, and he’s trying to get back here to fix it.”

“He can’t do that,” Wesley snaps. “He’s better off where he is.”

“I just came from Neverland. Believe me, he doesn’t want to be there.”

Wesley stays silent, his eyes searching mine as he works his jaw. “It’s for the best,” he finally says.

“Like you leaving Alice and me was for the best?” The question is out of my mouth before I can stop myself.

“What ...? Alessandria?” Wesley says, frowning and taking another step back. He glances around frantically. “How ...?”

Thunder rolls somewhere above. The trees around us quiver, the ground shakes, and I stumble sideways. The glowing flowers snap closed, their petals retreating and plunging the grove into darkness. Something

crashes in the forest, followed by an ear-splitting growl. The trees across the small clearing part, huge claws pushing the trunks aside and splintering them. A beast with razor sharp fangs and feline eyes towers over us.

“Don’t look at it!” Wesley grabs my wrist, pulling me along through the trees. Rose shrieks, almost falling from my shoulder, as the ground seems to ripple beneath our feet. Snapping sounds dance around us, and leaves and twigs fall from above, pricking my skin and tangling in my hair. I’m not sure if the snaps are coming from breaking branches or the creature’s jaws.

Wesley shoves us into a hole at the base of a tree, and I tumble over myself as I fall. Rose shrieks again, clinging to my hair as the dirt walls of the rabbit hole rush past us. Then my descent slows, and moments later, I land on my bottom with a soft thump. Wesley lands on his feet beside me and extends his hand. I take it, letting him help me up.

“What was that ... that thing?” I ask.

“The Jabberwock is on the move again,” Wesley replies. “We’re safe down here.”

“That was the Jabberwock?”

Wesley wrings his hands. “Yes, and you must never look into its eyes. It feeds from your fear, and once caught in its trance, it will consume you.”

A shiver runs up my spine and I rub my arms to ward off a phantom chill. “I’ll try to remember that.”

I glance around at my surroundings. We’re in a small, simply furnished chamber. Magic fire burns in several recesses dug from the walls. There’s

a bed, a desk, and a washstand. An opening leads off to the left, down a dark tunnel.

“Your burrow?” I ask.

Wesley inclines his head. I step over to the desk, but he reaches it first and flips the parchment that’s there over. What’s he got to hide? Not that it’s really any of my business.

He seems to hold his breath, then he finally says. “Alice ... how is she?”

I stare at him. “My *sister* is ...” But I can’t finish, because I don’t know how she is.

My unfinished sentence hangs between us. Wesley’s eyes bare his soul, and they change from confusion to understanding in a heartbeat.

He takes a step back and bumps into the dirt wall. “You know?”

It seems we *are* going to talk about the complicated thing after all.

“That you’re my father?” I blurt.

I wince, then look up at Wesley.

“When did Alice tell you?”

“She didn’t. Although, that would have been better,” I say. “All my life, I’ve believed she was my sister, until the Lake of Memories told me otherwise.”

“Ah.” He nods, as though it explains everything, but doesn’t ask about the lake. “How is she?” he asks again.

I glare at him for a moment. “You should have come back. Then you would know. Now, please send us back to Neverland. Ronan needs us.”

Wesley returns my glare. “How did you get to Neverland in the first place?”

“I ... opened a doorway.”

“Then you’re quite capable of getting yourself back to Ronan.”

“But ... I don’t know how I do it. Just that it has something to do with the pocket watch and the key.”

“What did you say?”

“The pocket watch.” I reach into my skirts and bring out the timepiece. “Alice gave it to me and asked me to keep it safe.”

“No, no, no!” Wesley says, grabbing a fistful of hair. “It can’t be here.”

“Why? Ronan just wants to come home. And I, apparently, have been tasked with helping him, because, apparently, I’m from Wonderland, and can open doorways, of which I know nothing about. So please, can you just help me get him here?”

Wesley frantically shakes his head. “No, no. I can’t do that. He must stay in Neverland.”

“Why?” I want to stamp my foot like a child. “Why was he sent away? Why did his family and friends abandon him? What could he have done that was so terrible?”

Wesley is quiet for a moment. “It’s not what he did. It’s who he is.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Wonderland is too dangerous for someone like Ronan.”

“Excuse me.” Rose launches from my shoulder and hovers in front of Wesley, looking from the White Rabbit to me and back again while

spraying her glitter everywhere. “So now you know Alessa has the pocket watch, you’ll help us get back?”

Wesley sneezes, then pulls a white handkerchief from his pocket and blows his nose. “Yes. You must go back now. The pocket watch cannot be here.”

“Why?” I ask.

“But it shouldn’t be with Ronan either,” he mumbles. “Lesser of two evils ...”

“Why?” I ask again. “You’re not making any sense.”

“To you.” Wesley rummages around on his desk. “I’m not making sense to you, but to myself, everything is perfectly clear.”

“As mud!” I cry.

“It’s the Neverland curse,” Wesley says. “Ronan can’t get back to Wonderland. The Queen of Hearts put many things in place to make sure of it. Neverland will keep him there or Wonderland will keep spitting him back. Either way, he can’t come home.”

My mouth drops open. “You knew he would end up in Neverland when we left London?” I glare at my so-called father.

“What? London? When?” His brow furrows. “I haven’t seen Ronan since he was banished. And he’s certainly never been to London.”

“With Alice, and Lucy, and me.”

“Who is Lucy?” He raises his eyebrows, then returns to looking through his desk drawers.

“It hasn’t happened yet,” Rose whispers in my ear.

I suck in a sharp breath. I'd totally forgotten we're still in the past. The Neverland past, at least. Here, I have no idea where or when I am. Am I in Wonderland's past or present? It's obviously Wesley's present, but if I'm in the past ... I squeeze my eyes closed for a second, feeling as though someone has stuck their finger in my brain and swished it around.

Every time I try to think about how it works, I get a headache, but this is the past for the Wesley I know. I haven't met him in the future yet.

"Maybe this is supposed to happen," I whisper back to Rose. "This could be the event that makes Wesley return to Alice."

"Hmmm," Wesley says, glancing up. "Did you say something? Ah! Found it." Wesley straightens from behind the desk, his elbow bumping a stack of paper which slides from the top and spills all over the floor. In his hand is another pocket watch. He frowns, gives it a shake near his ear, then stares at the clock face. His mouth drops open. "You shouldn't be here. It's the wrong time. I can't be late."

"No, you can't," I say. "You must go to Alice."

"Yes, yes." Wesley comes around the desk, making a shooing action. "And you must go back to Neverland." He stops and frantically looks around. "Where did you go?"

Then Wesley fades until I can see through him to the other side of the burrow, as though he is a ghost. His image ripples before becoming solid again.

"I'm right here." I plant my feet firmly in place. "And I'm not going until you tell me how to bring Ronan home."

Wesley starts, as though he has also seen a ghost. "I can't do that."

"Yes, you can."

“No, I can’t.”

“Yes.” I glare at him. “You can. There must be a loophole.”

“I can’t be late,” Wesley says again. “Would you stop doing that?”

“Doing what?”

But he doesn’t hear me. Wesley turns in a circle, looking from the floor to the roof, all around the room, searching for something. All the while, he fades in and out again.

I tap him on the shoulder. “I’m here.”

Wesley jumps, staring at me as though I’m a complete stranger. “What have you done? You’re here, but you’re not. Where do you go when you disappear?”

“I don’t have the faintest idea what you’re on about,” I say.

“It’s the timeline,” Rose says from my shoulder. “Like he said. We’re here, but not here. We need to get back to Neverland. To the right time.”

“Which is actually the wrong time, because it’s in the past,” I say.

Wesley shakes the pocket watch again. “Wrong time,” he mumbles.

“Please, tell me how to bring Ronan home.”

Wesley folds his arms. “I can’t do that.”

I press my lips together, my patience wearing thin. “You need him. And you know it. Tell me.”

Wesley regards me for a moment, his nose twitching as he blinks too much. “Ronan already has the answer. He just needs to find his heart.”

“That does not help!” I cry. “I know he’s stuck there because his heart is broken and he thinks Wonderland doesn’t want him. How do I get him to

... unthink that? How can we fix his broken heart?"

"The Queen of Hearts had to make him forget. Then believe Wonderland didn't want him, so it would be true." Wesley taps the face of the pocket watch this time, then shakes it against his ear.

"She what?"

"The only part of magic that is an absolute must, is belief."

"You're not making any sense."

Wesley grabs me by the arms, the pocket watch in his hand digging into my skin, and looks at me with the eyes of a madman. "Think, Alessa. What is the one thing about Wonderland that actually makes sense?"

I stare into his crazed eyes and sift through everything he's said in the past few minutes. "If you believe in me, then I'll believe in you," I mumble.

"Exactly," Wesley says, releasing me. "Belief. If you believe it, then it must be true."

"Not always."

"Yes. Always. Wonderland has heart magic. The most powerful kind. But Ronan, he broke things here so often because his heart wasn't really in it. He didn't *believe* in himself enough. The heart knows what it wants, even if the head thinks differently." Wesley taps his temple. "You have heart magic, too. After all, you are from Wonderland. It's why you can open doorways. It's why I can create rabbit holes. It's how everyone in Wonderland has a little magic inside them."

"But that's just it," I say. "I don't know how I open the doorways."

"Believe that you can, and you will."

“It’s that simple?”

“It’s actually quite complicated, but yes, if it helps you sleep at night, it’s *that* simple.”

“You still haven’t told me how I can get Ronan home,” I say. “He’s been trying to get back to Wonderland ever since he left.”

“Well, that is simple—”

“Simple, simple, or complicated simple?”

Wesley chuckles. “Ronan is the only one who can unlock it.” Wesley stares at me, his eyes wide, then he glances around as though someone could be listening. “Why do you think I sent the pocket watch to London with Alice? It’s where it was safest. We had to keep his heart safe. To keep *him* safe.”

I look down at the pocket watch I’m holding. The stone in the key glows red, pulsing against my breastbone. “Am I holding his heart in my hands?”

“A third of it, yes. Another piece is here in Wonderland. Hidden where I hope to the Jabberwock no one can find it.”

“And the third piece?” I run my thumb over the cracked face of the pocket watch.

“It’s in Neverland, but I can’t tell you any more.” Wesley turns me around and pushes me until I’m under the entrance to the burrow. “He’s not supposed to come back.”

I spin and face him. “Why?”

“Because if Ronan is here, and he dies, Wonderland dies with him.”

I stare at my father with my mouth open. “Dies? Who said anything about dying? That will *not* happen.”

“You don’t know that. The Jabberwock is on the loose again.” Wesley scratches his head. “We had to send Ronan somewhere safe. Where he can’t be killed. It’s almost happened before. We can’t risk losing him. We can’t risk losing our home.”

“So you banished him!” Anger rises in my chest and I clench my fists. “To somewhere he can’t be killed? Well, you really made a mistake there, because Ronan has a few enemies who would love to see him dead. He should be in Wonderland.”

“We had to protect him,” Wesley whispers.

“You mean protect yourselves!” I yell. “And how’s that working out for you? How has Wonderland been since he left? Because from the little I’ve seen and heard, it’s not so great.”

Wesley straightens to his full height, puffing out his chest. “You know nothing about me, or Wonderland, so you cannot judge—”

“Oh, I know plenty about *you*.” I step forward and poke him in the chest. “You abandoned Alice, and me, and now Ronan as well. You haven’t fought to protect anyone or anything. You basically locked your problems in a cupboard. Or in this case, on the other side of a magic door. You’re a coward.”

“His hat,” Wesley says.

“What?”

“His hat is one of the pieces.” Wesley retreats behind his desk and opens the top drawer, rummaging around inside. He brings out a small object pinched between his thumb and forefinger. “Take him to the Lake of

Memories and give him this.” He comes back to where I’m standing under the burrow entrance and drops a pearl into my hand.

“You know about the lake?”

“I have connections. I know all about Neverland. And I hope to Wonderland I haven’t doomed us all,” he replies.

I close my fist around the pearl. “If I know Ronan like I think I do, he will fight harder for Wonderland than everyone else here combined.” After putting the pearl into my pocket, I take the key and wind the pocket watch.

“What are you doing?” Wesley asks.

“I must get back now.” The cogs in the timepiece click as I wind. “The last door I created by winding the pocket watch and saying I want to go to Wonderland. If I say I want to go to Ronan, hopefully it will work.”

Wesley chuckles, laughing until his shoulders shake, and he clutches his stomach.

“What’s so funny?” I glare at him.

“Do you think you open doorways using the pocket watch?”

“Well, yes. And the key. They have been the common denominators every time.”

“Every time?”

I open my mouth to respond, but falter because I’m not sure. I’m not sure of anything. “I ... don’t really know,” I finally say.

Wesley shakes his head, still chuckling. “They no doubt have a connection to each other, but your magic is your own, Alessandria. Heart magic. Believe in Wonderland. Believe in yourself. Believe you can open doorways, and you can go anywhere you want.”

“The most important part of magic is belief?” I say.

“Exactly. Now hurry, or you’ll make me late.” He waves his hands in a shooing motion. “Put the pocket watch away and open a doorway to Neverland.”

I do as he says, stuffing the timepiece into my pocket. Then I twist my fingers together and try to imagine a doorway in front of me.

“You can do it,” Rose whispers in my ear.

“Believe in me and I’ll believe in you,” I mumble.

“Use your heart, not your head,” Wesley says, glancing at his pocket watch.

I picture Ronan, the line of his jaw, the way he musses his hair when he runs his hand through it, and just when I think I’m being ridiculous and nothing is going to happen, my chest fills with warmth and the familiar pull I’ve experience before. *Is that my magic? Tugging on my heart?* Moments later, a door appears in the dirt wall of the burrow.

“Perfect!” Wesley shouts, making me jump. “Off you go. See you soon, I suppose.”

My heart races as I grasp the faerie-shaped handle, and with a deep breath, I pull it open, hoping to Neverland that Ronan is on the other side of this door.

Because not only does Wonderland need him.

I need him, too.

A BROKEN HEART

RONAN

Images of Wonderland drift through my mind. I snatch one and hold on tight before it can get away. Teacups clink and chatter as I pair them with saucers on the long table outside Tea House, making sure none of them match.

“Ronan!” Something hits my cheek.

My eyes fly open, my vision now filled with pink glitter. Rose pokes me on the nose and I flinch.

“What the bloody hell are you doing?” Then I look past the faerie. “Alessa?”

I scramble to my feet, rubbing the blariness of sleep from my eyes. Alessa stands in a patch of sunlight shining through the forest canopy, an open doorway behind her. I catch a glimpse of a dark dirt tunnel before the door closes and disappears. She runs to me and throws her arms around me, her heart racing against my chest. I wrap her in a hug, not wanting to ever let go.

Alessa pulls back and stares at me. “How long have I been gone?” She runs her fingers over the stubble on my cheek, then glances up at the sunlight peeking through the trees.

“A few days,” I reply, unsure what else to say or what questions to ask.

“Days?” Her mouth drops open. “Surely I haven’t been gone that long.”

“Where are Wendeline and Tiger Lily?” Rose asks, flitting around and peering behind a few tree trunks.

“They returned to *Vengeance*,” I say. “The crew needed to know what was happening.”

“I swear I was only away a couple of hours.” Alessa grips my forearms. “Days, did you say?”

“Time here works differently.” I reach up and brush a strand of hair from her cheek. “Same goes for Wonderland. There’s no point trying to understand it. Time does what he wants, often in irrational and nonsensical ways.”

“I’m getting a little tired of Time,” Alessa huffs.

“Let’s not worry about him for now. Tell me where you’ve been and what happened.”

Alessa tilts her head and worries at her bottom lip. “I was in the most amazing forest I’ve ever seen. The flowers were glowing. It was beautiful. Then Wesley was there, and the Jabberwock appeared, and we ran.”

“Are you hurt?” I hold her at arms-length, searching for any sign of injury.

“I’m fine, Ronan.” She holds my stare, her eyes filled with something that suggests otherwise. “I learned something from Wesley, but I fear if I try to tell you ... I don’t think you’ll hear it.” She blows a breath out between her teeth. “When I’ve tried to tell you things in the past, you haven’t understood me.”

“While you were gone, Tiger Lily tried to tell me what Nerida said to you under Marooner’s Rock,” I say. “But I couldn’t hear a word of it. She managed to show me that the key has something to do with my heart.”

“Oh, it has lots to do with your heart,” Rose says.

Alessa squeezes my arm. “Come with me to the lake. There’s something you need to remember.”

“The lake?” I release her, step back, and run my hand through my hair.

Alessa looks at me, still chewing on her lip. “Do you trust me?”

Rose flits to my shoulder and pokes me in the cheek before plopping down. “You *should* trust her.”

“It seems we could both use a wash as well.” Alessa crinkles her nose and folds her arms over her stomach.

I chuckle, rubbing my cheek with my palm. “Yes, I suppose.”

Alessa glances around at the now dead vines laying at the base of the tree she went through. “What happened while I was gone?”

“Not a great deal, love. The vines kept covering the door, and we kept ripping them off.”

She regards me but doesn’t ask any further questions.

Rose pokes my cheek again. “Let’s get a move on.”

“Aye, let’s.” I dig my fingers into the pouch at my waist and sprinkle myself with faerie dust.

Alessa does the same, and we kick off the ground, aiming for a gap in the canopy. Rose darts ahead, and we fly south towards the lake, its surface glittering in the distance.

Unease seeps into my veins, dread coursing through me at the thought of opening my mind to the lake. I know there will be memories I don’t want back, and they’ve left a hollowness inside me I’ve worked hard to ignore. Some things are better forgotten. But maybe what Alessa says I

need to remember is important. Maybe this memory will finally get me home.

My boots sink into the soft sand on the lake's edge, and a moment later Alessa touches down beside me. Rose settles on my shoulder, and I stare out over the expanse of water as it shimmers under the Neverland sunlight. My chest tightens at the thought of the truth, my truth, coming back to haunt me.

But Alessa asked if I trust her, and although I didn't give her a direct answer, Rose said I should. They both know more than I do, apparently, and I have an overwhelming urge to scratch the itch crawling through the crevices of my thoughts.

Alessa shrugs out of her coat, then removes her boots, belt, and altered gown, until she's standing on the shore of the lake in nothing but her chemise. I don't look away, because I don't want to, and I take a moment to revel in her beauty. The first time we did this, she was so concerned about her modesty, but now, she glances at me, a small smile on her lips. I hold her gaze, and this moment, as though it were a glass bubble about to break.

Alessa tilts her head. "Are you planning to swim with all your clothes on?"

Rose giggles from my shoulder, then flits into the air and alights on a tree branch. She sprawls onto her stomach and rests her tiny chin in her hands, a grin on her mischievous face.

I kick off my boots, remove my belt, coat, shirt, and pants, recalling Alessa's reaction the last time. A blush rises into her cheeks, but she

doesn't look away, and I step to her side. She twists her hands together, fidgeting with something between her fingers.

"Are you ready?" Alessa asks.

"As I'll ever be."

I step into the lake, the cool water a shock against the bare skin of my feet, and wade out until I'm waist-deep. Alessa follows, her right hand clenched into a fist. We move a little farther, the soft silty bottom squeezing between my toes, then Alessa touches my arm.

"Wesley said to give you this." She holds out her hand, a small pearl cupped in her palm.

I stare at the pearl, a memory tugging at the edges of my mind, but I can't quite hold on to it. It's as though it's behind me, and every time I turn towards it, it ducks just out of sight. My chest tightens as I grip the pearl between my thumb and forefinger, unsure what to do with it.

Then it rolls down my finger and I twist my hand to catch it in my palm, where it melts like snow and seeps into my skin. Cold rushes up my arm, into my chest, over my shoulder, then explodes behind my eyes. Something wraps around my ankles and tugs me into the lake, and I hear Alessa cry my name as the water swallows me whole.

I plummet into the depths, darkness surrounding me as I fight the lake and its icy grip. Then Nerida is there. She floats towards me and holds my face with both hands, leans in, then air rushes around my head as the breathing bubble forms.

She darts away as the first memory almost blinds me, the image engulfing me as I blink against the glare. The brightness recedes, revealing a scene I've long forgotten.

Pain explodes in my chest anew, a hand presses over my heart. I grip the person's wrist with two hands. *I have two hands*. But when I bring my arms up, reality is there behind the memory, light glinting off the curve of my hook.

I'm not really in pain, but the memory is so strong I may as well be. My mother glares at me, her face filling my vision. Her other hand grips my shoulder as her fingers dig into my chest and squeeze.

Then she rips my heart out.

It beats in her grasp, and I choke on my breaths, unable to believe I am still alive.

"It's for your own good," she says, her voice an echo in my mind. "Forget."

I close my eyes to free myself of the memory, and when I open them again, Nerida is back. I search the depths of the lake for Alessa, then realise she is right beside me, her hand on my shoulder. When our gazes connect, she smiles through the bubble encasing her mouth and nose.

"My own mother took my heart," I say, before either of them can speak. I press my palm to my chest, finally able to understand why I feel so hollow. So ... empty.

"She had a good reason," Nerida replies, her voice like a song on the current.

"Because she didn't want me," I yell, surging towards Nerida. "*Wonderland* doesn't want me."

Nerida flinches, but only slightly. She moves her arms through the water in a hypnotic rhythm.

“It is not that Wonderland doesn’t want you.” The mermaid’s hair floats around her head like a dark halo. “You are too important, Ronan. They needed to keep you safe.”

“They? My parents?” I grind my teeth. “My *mother*?”

Nerida tilts her head, her arms still moving. “She loves you.”

Unbloody likely.

“She wanted to cut my head off.”

“But she didn’t. You are too important. She loves you,” Nerida repeats.

“If that’s the case, why didn’t she just bloody well tell me how damn important I am?” I clench my fist until my knuckles ache. “I would’ve left if they asked nicely.”

Nerida shakes her head, the strands of her hair writhing in the current. “They did tell you, and you refused to listen. You didn’t want to leave. You wanted to fight.”

She places her hand on my shoulder and a jolt, like an electric shock, courses through me. Another memory shoves its way to the front of my mind.

My mother returns. Sitting on her throne, her eyes hard and loveless, a heart-shaped crown on her head. She stares down at me where I kneel at her feet, her lips pursed, my heart literally in her lap.

“Wonderland is in danger with you here,” she says. “You must leave.”

“I will not abandon my home,” the me in the memory says, and I move my lips in time with my lost words.

“If you stay, you will put everyone in danger.”

“If I go, the danger will still be here.”

“We have been here before, Ronan. I have tried everything to keep you hidden, but you keep remembering. You *must* forget.”

Forget.

The word floats through me. My face in the memory goes blank, but I can still see everything that is happening. As though I had this memory all along, but it was being blocked.

“You must go. Wonderland cannot fall if you are gone.” The Queen leans forward, my heart pulsing in her lap as she grips the arms of her throne. “You do not understand. If you stay ... if you die—”

“I will not die!” Memory Me yells, and I’m vaguely aware of someone, Alessa, gripping my arm. “You have ripped my heart out and I am still here, so tell me, Mother, what could possibly kill me?”

“Nothing now, because I will make sure of it.” She takes my heart in both hands. “I will protect you, like I always have.”

Then she rips my heart in two.

Pain lances through me and I lurch forward, as though this is happening to me all over again. Nerida’s form floats behind the memory, her head still tilted to the side.

The Queen of Hearts breaks my heart again.

Forget.

My mother cups the three pieces of my heart in her hands, then blows her magic over them and says, “When you were one, it had begun. I made you two, to hide what’s true. Pieces of three, will set you free. Protect this heart, and hide each part.”

The segments of my heart rise before my mother. Something in the peripheral of the memory moves, and Wesley steps forward. His nervous fingers clutch the pocket watch in one hand, and the brim of my hat in the other. I squint at the images playing out in the depths of the lake as Memory Me touches the top of my head.

Two of the heart pieces move towards Wesley. He holds out my hat, and one of the pieces floats into it. He turns the hat over, revealing a new heart-shaped detail that decorates the surface of the crown, stitched in red thread against the black felt. He holds out the pocket watch, the cover open, and the second piece disappears inside it. A heart-shape forms in the metal on the back, then the cover closes with a snap. The third piece still rests in my mother's lap.

She holds her hand palm up in front of her and blows across it. "Forget," she says, as her magic swirls towards me.

The memory vanishes as I thrash in the water, fighting to make it back to the surface.

Forget.

Remember.

Tick-tock.

I keep remembering?

What do I keep remembering?

What did she so desperately want me to forget?

I've seen too much, but I haven't seen enough. How many more memories are in my mind that I don't know I have? How much of my life has been taken away from me, supposedly for my own good?

My head emerges from the water, and I take in a gasp of air as it drips into my eyes. I slap the surface of the lake, a growl of frustration vibrating in my throat. I tilt my head to the Neverland sky, where night has fallen again. How long were we down there? Too long. Not long enough. Time is messing with me again, just as he always has.

Alessa surfaces near me, Nerida at her side.

I lock my stare onto the mermaid. “Why show me this now? After all this time, why?”

Nerida is calm, the moonlight glinting off her dark hair. “Because you must reclaim your heart, Ronan. Once you have the first two pieces back, you will be able to go home.” She studies me, and for a moment I’m not sure if she will continue, but then she says, “Wonderland cannot fall while you are gone, but it is not *safe*. Your mother does not always make the best decisions, so when I agreed to aid her, I ensured there would be a way to undo your curse. To release you from Neverland if needed. I’m truly sorry I could not help you sooner. I was not able to on my own.” Her gaze flicks to Alessa and her stoic features hint at a smile. “Wonderland is in danger. It needs you now more than ever.” Nerida pauses, tilting her head in her usual way. “The time has come for you to remember who you are.”

ILLOGICAL LOGIC

ALESSA

Ronan treads water beside me, his dark eyes fixed on Nerida. She stares back at him, her expression serene. She's so calm, and it infuriates me, because now is not the time to be calm. *Ronan is missing his heart!*

I touch Ronan's arm and he flinches, as though he has forgotten I'm here. "The pocket watch," I choke out, my voice small. "Your hat ..."

He returns his gaze to the mermaid. "How do I get it back?"

His heart. His broken heart!

My chest aches, as though my own heart is breaking for him.

"Use the key," Nerida says, and then she is gone, swallowed by the depths of the lake.

Ronan stares at the ripples on the water's surface for what feels like an eternity.

I gently squeeze his arm. "We should go." My teeth chatter, even though the water is warm.

He nods, and we swim back to the shore, the silence and the Neverland night weighing heavy between us. I traipse up the bank to where I left my clothing, wringing out the hem of my chemise as I go. The pocket watch shines silver in the moonlight, and even though I already knew it holds a piece of Ronan's heart, now that it's confirmed, it somehow seems all too real. Or surreal. My mind can't quite grasp the expanse of what I just saw in Ronan's memories.

His mother ripped his heart from his chest and broke it.

I crouch and set the pocket watch gently aside, then quickly dress. When I turn to Ronan, the timepiece resting on my palm, he stares at me with empty eyes, as though he has retreated inside his mind, searching for more answers.

“Forgetting was better.” Ronan clutches his chest and squeezes his eyes closed. “Remembering hurts too damn much.”

Slowly, I go to him and press my hand over his, the pocket watch between us.

“We can fix this,” I say. “I can help you remember yourself.”

He looks down at me, his brow furrowed. “I’m not sure I want to know.”

I take a deep breath, then gently prise his fingers open and push the pocket watch into his hand. “If I can love the man you are now, then I most certainly can love the man you used to be.”

Ronan’s lips part. He raises his eyebrow and tilts his head. “You love me?”

A grin forms on my lips. “I suppose I do.”

“How can you love someone who is heartless?”

“You’re not heartless.” I reach up and press my palm against his cheek. “You’re just lost. But I’ll help you find your way again.”

Ronan looks down at the pocket watch. “Use the key,” he mumbles.

I lift the leather necklace over my head and hold it out to him. Ronan hesitates, then raises his hook. “Only one hand, remember?”

I suppress a chuckle, take the timepiece from him, then open the back cover and hold it so he can slip the key into the winding hole. Ronan winds the pocket watch all the way until the key will no longer turn. It elicits a faint click and he removes the key. I hold my breath, vaguely aware of Rose, who has been quiet until now, gently landing on Ronan's shoulder.

Ronan opens his mouth, but before he can say anything, the keyhole glows red, brighter than I have ever seen it. The light seeps from the back of the pocket watch, curling in mist-like tendrils and rising into the air between us. Then it darts at Ronan, slamming into his chest with enough force to knock him back a step.

Rose squawks and tumbles from Ronan's shoulder, her wings beating frantically. She circles around to hover at my side. "What was that?"

Ronan leans forward, clutching his chest and breathing hard.

"A piece of his heart." I glance at the pocket watch.

Something shifts beneath my fingers. I snap it closed and turn it over as the final leaf of the design moves into place. The heart-shape is gone and the back case is now completely covered with roses, stems, and leaves. But the pattern shifts, forming the heart again and revealing an inscription within it.

Begin at the beginning.

I repeat the words to myself a couple of times, remembering the rest of the King of Heart's words. *And go on till you come to the end: then stop.* But why is there only part of the advice engraved into the pocket watch?

"Ronan, are you all right?" Rose asks.

He straightens and looks into my eyes. An involuntary gasp passes my lips. Ronan's eyes are green, as they always have been, but there is a light

inside them I have not seen before.

“Aye, Rose,” Ronan says, not taking his stare from me. “Never been better.”

“What now?” I whisper.

Ronan takes a few steps to close the gap between us. He uses his hook and hand to slip the leather necklace back over my head. I tuck the pocket watch into my dress, making a note to show him the change later. The key rests against my chest, and Ronan brushes it with his fingers before trailing them over my collarbone, up my neck, and to my cheek.

My heart hammers against my ribcage, the new light in Ronan’s eyes swirling like a raging storm. His lips quirk at the corners, and heat burns my cheeks as he rakes his gaze over me. His stare rests on my mouth and I can’t help licking my lips.

Rose clears her throat. “Neither of you have told me what happened in the lake.”

I drag my gaze away from Ronan, very aware of how close he is and his scorching touch on my skin. Rose hovers to my left, her hands on her hips, and for a heartbeat I want to swat her away so I can have this moment with Ronan uninterrupted.

But now is not the time.

I take a step away to put some space between us. “Ronan just got a piece of his heart back. There are three. Another is in his hat in the lighthouse, the third is somewhere in Wonderland.”

Ronan opens and closes his fist and presses his lips together, as though he is trying to compose himself. He turns his full attention to Rose, and I

let out a long, controlled breath, willing the heat in my face, chest, and belly to calm down.

“My mother ...” He stops, clenching his fist again and shaking his head. “It doesn’t matter now. What matters is getting the second piece of my heart so we can get to Wonderland.” Ronan laughs, but the sound is hollow. “Mother dearest won’t know what hit her.”

“Come on, then.” Rose flits higher into the air, her pink glitter mingling with the silver stars.

Ronan and I refresh our faerie dust that washed off in the lake, then he takes my hand and we join Rose, flying towards Wonderheart.

In the distance, the beam flashes out over the Neversea, illuminating *Vengeance* where she bobs on the water off the coast of the lighthouse island. As we draw closer, and the beam rounds again, I catch a glimpse of something small fluttering amongst the stars; a trail of orange sparkles in its wake.

Tiger Lily.

She reaches the lighthouse as we touch down at the base of the odd building.

“Where have you been?” the fiery faerie asks, hands on her hips. “I returned to the woods, but you weren’t there. I’ve been all around Neverland trying to find you.” Her eyes widen and she darts forward, clutching Ronan’s nose with her tiny hands and staring into each eye. “What happened?”

Ronan gently pushes her away. “We returned to the Lake of Memories.”

Then he tells her everything we learned. Rose listens intently alongside her sister, both faerie's expressions changing with each new piece of information.

"All this time, we've just been pawns in her game," Tiger Lily says.

"I'm sorry you were dragged into this," Ronan says, rubbing his cheek. "It would have been better if you stayed in Wonderland."

"So we could be stuck in the ground all the time?" Rose says. "No thanks."

I move closer to Ronan and take his hand. "You ready?"

He looks up at the glass dome of the lighthouse, then back at me. "Unbelievably so."

Ronan presses his hand to the wall of Wonderheart, revealing the entrance, and we race up the stairs to the lantern room. I stare out over the Neversea, marvelling at the beauty of the sugary sky stretched out before me. It will be sad to say goodbye to Neverland, but my heart aches to see Alice again, and it aches even more now that we are so close.

Ronan touches my arm, bringing me back to the room. "I need the key, love."

His eyes smoulder, and I wonder how much they will change once he has the second piece of his heart back. If he is destroying any sense of resolve I have now, I can't even contemplate how weak his stare will make me when he's whole again.

I blink rapidly to regain my composure, then slip the leather over my head and pass him the key. Ronan steps up to the lantern. The hat spins slowly, casting its light over Neverland, as he walks around it a couple of times, his brows dipped in thought.

“There’s no keyhole,” he mumbles.

I study the hat. “Maybe you need to put it on?”

Ronan raises an eyebrow and grins. “I knew I brought you for a reason.”

“Stop!” Tiger Lily yells, just as Ronan’s fingers brush the brim of the hat. “This is wrong.”

“What the bloody hell do you mean?” Ronan asks. “My memory knows a piece of my heart is in here.”

“But it’s not the right piece.” Tiger Lily darts over and puts herself between Ronan and the hat. “When you went into the past, you created two timelines. You’re on the wrong timeline.” The little faerie’s eyes plead with Ronan. “If you do this now, here, there will still be a piece of your heart on the other timeline.” She starts in the air, her mouth forming an O and her eyes going wide. “Who knows what effect that will have? I told you to stop messing with Time!”

“Ronan, she’s right.” I grab his arm. “We have to wait for the timelines to meet again, so there’s only one.”

“But we got the piece from the pocket watch.” He gestures towards my skirts where the timepiece is hidden.

“This is the original pocket watch. It’s the one we’ve had with us since the moment we met,” I say.

Ronan runs his hand through his hair. The muscles of his hook arm flex under my grasp and I let go. He walks to the glass and stares out at the sea, hands on his hips. Rose flits over and perches on his shoulder, patting his cheek.

“I’ve lost track of where we’re up to with Time,” he finally says, glancing at me over his shoulder.

I worry at my lip, moving to stand beside Ronan. It’s still dark out, the sky lit by the full Neverland moon and twinkling stars. Fatigue washes over me, making my limbs heavy, and I can’t recall the last time I had a good sleep. It seems we’ve been going for days, when really it shouldn’t be that long.

Time works differently here.

The Neversea churns, whitecaps drifting across the surface of the water. A bird cries somewhere in the distance. I stare at the cloudless sky, then remember what happened the last time we were here. In my mind’s eye, I see the sun rising and falling, casting orange, pink, and purple light through the clouds as time spun and ... What did Ronan say?

“Reset ...” I mumble.

“What was that, love?” Ronan asks.

“Reset,” I repeat. “If you can reset the island, like what happened when you fixed the hat’s thread, can you speed it up? Can we speed up the days?”

“I’m ... not sure.”

“Come on, Ronan.” I spin to face him. “If you can travel through time, surely you can do whatever the hell you want in this place. Just ... wave your hand and use your magic.” I wave my own hands at him.

“A lady shouldn’t use language like that.”

I plant my hands on my hips. “Now is not the time for an etiquette lesson.”

A heavy sigh sounds behind us, and I turn to where Tiger Lily hovers near the hat. She pinches the bridge of her nose with her tiny fingers and shakes her head.

“Come on, Tiger Lily,” Ronan says. “Get it off your chest.”

The faerie drops her hand to her side, looks at the hat, then at Ronan. “As much as I hate to say it, Alessa could be on to something. We don’t want to sit around waiting, so speeding things along may be our only option.”

“Do you know how to do that?” I face Ronan and worry at my lip, hoping he’ll say yes.

“I ... have a theory,” he finally replies, one eyebrow raised.

“A theory?”

“It’s where all good ideas start.”

Ronan rushes over to the lantern. The hat spins consistently in the same slow rhythm, round and round and round. He puts a finger to his lips, frowning, then squints.

“How long?” he mumbles.

“Wait,” I say, as Ronan reaches for the brim of the hat.

He groans, but lets his hand fall away. “What this time?”

“Will this actually work?”

Ronan shrugs. “Hopefully.”

“Hopefully?” I stare at him. “We’ll *hopefully* end up in the right time?”

“Yes?” he says.

“But you don’t know for sure?”

Ronan winces. “No.”

“Then, are we better off using the Time Tunnels?”

“Oh boy,” Tiger Lily says, covering her face with her hands.

“After getting the key, we always planned to return to the time we left, but we got stuck here fixing things, and—”

“I know, love. I was with you. Remember?” Ronan puts his hand on his hip and grins.

“Alessa is right,” Rose says. “All you have to do to get the timelines to meet again is return to the time when you left for the past.”

“The future hasn’t happened from that point, on either timeline,” I add. “So they should just meet up. Shouldn’t they?”

“Logically, yes.” Ronan raises his eyebrow.

“Seriously, Ronan! Now you’re thinking logically? Nothing we’ve done so far has been logical! Everything is perfectly illogical.” I throw my hands in the air. “We’re talking time travel. And your heart is literally in pieces, for crying out loud!”

“To the Time Tunnels, then?” he asks.

Tiger Lily groans. “I hope this doesn’t break something again.”

“It won’t,” Ronan says.

“Do either of you need more faerie dust?” Tiger Lily asks.

I take a deep breath and huff it out, tired of going around in circles. Tired of this taking so long. Tired of having to figure out what to do next, where to go, how to move forward. Tired of illogical logic.

Tired of just being ... tired.

“No,” I say, rubbing my eyes. “I can get us there faster.”

THE BRINK OF SOMETHING AMAZING

RONAN

I fold my arms and watch Alessa carefully. I don't ask how she's going to get us to the Time Tunnels, I just wait patiently for her to do whatever it is she's going to do. Common sense tells me she's going to try to open a doorway. Past experience tells me she'll probably fail. But if it doesn't work, we can still fly.

She wrings her hands, her brow creased, and chews on her lip. I can't stop looking at her mouth, and all I've wanted to do to it since getting the first piece of my heart back is devour it with mine.

Thoughts of kissing her warm me in unmentionable places, and if she stands here any longer, biting her lip like that, I might just lose it. It's as though my blood is too hot, and it's about to burst through my skin. For so long, I've felt hollow and incomplete. The void in my chest a constant ache. Now, it's as though everything is more intense, colourful, more alluring. My emotions are screaming, rather than being a dull throb at the base of my stomach.

And that's only after getting one piece of my heart back.

Alessa releases her bottom lip, her mouth curling into a smile. Her eyes shine, and I fall into them, grinning back at her like a love-sick fool.

"Ronan." Rose swats my cheek. "Look." She points across the lantern room.

She and Tiger Lily flit over to where a door stands in front of the glass dome, surrounded by the darkness of the Neverland night.

“How?” I look back at Alessa, her hands still twisted in front of her. She isn’t holding the pocket watch, and the key hangs around her neck. “I thought you didn’t know how you create the doorways.”

“I didn’t. But Wesley may have taught me something,” she says, her smile widening. “He said that the only part of magic that is an absolute must—”

“Is belief,” I finish for her.

“Exactly. All I had to do was *really* believe that I could do it.” Her smile falters a little. “But that doesn’t explain how I opened the first door.”

“When I fell on top of you.” I grin. “Not that I’m complaining.”

I’d love to be on top of you right now.

If only she knew what I was thinking, her cheeks would be ablaze.

“Although, I had just started believing Wonderland was real.” Alessa shrugs, skirting around my comment. “Maybe, because I ignited that belief, Wonderland wanted me to find my way there? And to do that, I had to find you?”

“You’ll soon learn that in Wonderland, not everything can be explained,” I say. “And the more we try to find reason, the more we descend into madness.”

“But it’s a really fun place,” Rose adds, then she whispers, “stop it. You’ll scare her.”

Alessa laughs. "It's all right, Rose. I can handle a little madness. I'm Alice's daughter."

"I hope you find your way back to her," Tiger Lily says. "But you won't do it standing around here. Go on, both of you." She tilts her head and points her tiny thumb over her shoulder.

Alessa grips my outstretched hand and we approach the door. The frame is dark wood, and the handle is shaped like a faerie, so at least we know it will lead us somewhere in Neverland. She grabs the handle, opens the door, and we step through.

The mouth of the Time Tunnels gapes at us. Rose and Tiger Lily flutter near my shoulder.

"I guess this is where we part ways," I say. "You both need to stay here."

"Good luck." Rose wraps her tiny arms around my neck. "The other me will help you however she can."

"Just, stay out of trouble," Tiger Lily adds. "And make sure you eat some berries when you get back."

"Aye," I say, as the faeries fly off into the night. "Ready?" I squeeze Alessa's hand and look down at her.

She shakes her head. "Not yet."

I open my mouth to answer, but she presses a finger to my lips, holding my stare with her deep blue eyes. They are still filled with so many questions, but I know for certain now that I want her by my side as I help her answer them. Then she stands on her toes, lifting her face to mine, one question coming to the forefront of her expression.

And it's definitely one I can answer immediately.

I close the gap between us and our lips meet. The newly found piece of my heart explodes with electrified warmth and happiness as she deepens the kiss, tangling the fingers of her free hand into my hair. I grip her other hand and wrap my hook arm around her to pull her closer, unable to contemplate the thought of ever letting her go.

She pulls back, a sigh puffing over her lips as she shivers. I press my forehead to hers, my mouth curled into a lazy smile.

"Now, I'm ready," she whispers.

"Right then." I clear my throat.

We face the tunnel and walk together into the darkness. As we make our way through to the heart of the Time Tunnels, I focus on retracing our steps to emerge at the point in time when we originally entered. It wasn't all that long ago, but it feels like years have passed since I got my key back from Cordelia.

Purple fire glows and we continue walking. I blink, and we're staring at the opening to the Time Tunnels again.

"It's as though we never went in," Alessa says. "This time, or the last."

"If we've done this right, our other selves should be in there now, going back to get my key."

Alessa shakes her head and pinches the bridge of her nose with her thumb and forefinger. "My head hurts."

I chuckle and nudge her shoulder, giving her hand a gentle squeeze. "Don't try to make sense of things and you'll feel much better. But let's hope all this pain hasn't been for nothing. Come on."

We sprinkle ourselves with faerie dust, then kick off the ground and take to the sky. Alessa is far more confident now, and I smile at her as we soar above the island. *Vengeance* should still be on a course for Neverdrop, but I'm eager to retrieve the second piece of my heart so we can get off this damn island.

"Fly for Wonderheart," I yell to Alessa over the wind.

She nods, taking my hand again, and we dip and twist over Tiger Lily's Garden, then out to the lighthouse island, wasting no time getting inside and up to the lamp room. I grab a handful of berries from the fount at the top of the stairs, shoving the sickly sweet fruit into my mouth and eating them as fast as I can. The first time I ate the berries, it was as though I could eat them for every meal they tasted so good. Now, my stomach churns, and my mouth tingles as Neverland's magic touches mine, making me light-headed for a moment as I blink away the dizziness.

We move to the centre of the room and stand with the hat between us, the lantern light flashing out across the sea. Alessa looks at me from under the brim.

"I just ... put it on?" I ask.

She shrugs. "It's what you usually do with a hat."

"Aye, love."

I take a deep breath and let it out slowly, then grasp the brim gently with my thumb and forefinger to stop the hat spinning. The light stills, sending the ocean dark, and I brace myself for something bad to happen. But the ground doesn't shake and the sky stays where it is.

With another breath, I pull the hat towards me, and it becomes heavier in my hand, no longer suspended as the lighthouse lamp. With a smile on

my lips, I flip the hat onto my head and run my fingers over the front of the brim. I bow low, eliciting a laugh from Alessa.

When I straighten again, her eyes widen. She takes the key from around her neck and steps closer, passing it to me.

“There’s a keyhole in the top,” she says.

I take the hat off, tucking it under my left arm, and sure enough, in the centre of the heart on the hat’s crown is a keyhole the same size as the one in the pocket watch.

“Ready?” Alessa asks.

“The last time I asked *you* that, you kissed me.” I grin, and a blush rises into her cheeks. She raises her chin, so I lean down and brush her lips with mine, but I don’t linger. “Now, I’m ready,” I say, echoing her words.

I slip the key into the top of the hat and wind it until I can’t wind it any farther. The hat thrums. The red stitching of the heart rises into the air like mist, keeping its shape before swirling like a cyclone. Then it slams into my chest hard enough to knock me backwards. Alessa reaches for me, grabbing my arm and catching the hat before it can hit the floor.

I right my feet and take the hat from Alessa. New stitching has formed in the crown, spelling out the words, *and go on till you come to the end*.

“Why is that there?” I stare at it, knowing they are my father’s words, but confused because it’s not even half of what he said.

Alessa brings the pocket watch out and passes it to me. “The first part is on the back. I didn’t tell you before because there was so much going on.”

“The last part is missing.” I hold Alessa’s stare.

“Maybe it has something to do with finding the final piece of your heart?”

“Which is in Wonderland.”

“You should be strong enough to go now,” she says, an excited edge to her voice. “Neverland can’t keep you here any longer.”

“Then we’d better figure out how to leave.” I set the top hat on my head, and warmth rushes through me, filling the cracked recesses of my mind and heart.

Alessa presses her lips together, walking to the glass to look out at the Neversea. The water churns, moonlight glinting off the whitecaps, turning the surface to liquid silver. She moves around the circular room and stops to face the island. From up here, all of Neverland is laid out before us. Waves crash below as we stare at the mountains in the distance.

“Will you miss it?” she asks. “Because look how beautiful it is.”

I stand at her side, not sure how to answer, because it *is* beautiful, and I’m thankful that she’s made me stop to look at everything that I’ve created. Everything that Neverland’s magic has allowed me to create with my own.

If it wasn’t for Neverland, I would never have met Alessa. We would not be standing here right now, on the brink of something amazing.

“Aye, I will,” I finally say, and as much as I want to leave this place, I realise it’s the truth. “Neverland has looked after me, and I made it pretty wonderful, but Wonderland is more so. It’s even in the name.”

Alessa smiles, turning to the room where a doorway now sits in place of the lantern. “Then we better get back to *Vengeance* so we can go home.”

HOME IS WHERE YOUR HEART IS

ALESSA

Ronan and I emerge from the magical doorway onto the deck of *Vengeance* and the crew send up an almighty cheer, drowning out Smee's usual announcement of, "Captain on board!"

I catch Ronan's eye roll as he passes his bo'sun on his way to the quarterdeck, and I have to suppress my smirk. Smee means well, and he's so loyal to Ronan, so I'm not sure why he gets under his captain's skin so much. I can't stop my laugh though when Rose smacks into Ronan's face, pink glitter flying everywhere, and squeals, "You're back!"

Then Lucy barrels into me and wraps her arms around me, holding me tight. "I was so scared. You should never have done that." She steps back and swats my arm. "The *Crocodile*! What were you thinking?"

"I was trying to help," I reply. "It turned out well in the end. We got the key. Oh, Lucy, I've so much to tell you!"

I glance up to the quarterdeck where Wendeline and Ronan stand at the railing, staring down at me. Wendeline knits her brow as our gazes connect, her expression a mixture of her usual contempt, but also something else. Confusion, maybe?

"Go." Lucy nudges my arm. "You can tell me about it later."

Before I can protest, she makes her way over to where Jackson is working on the rigging, and I figure she is happy for now with him, so I climb the steps onto the quarterdeck.

“What did you both do?” Wendeline asks once I’m standing beside Ronan.

“We got the key,” Ronan says.

“And two pieces of Ronan’s heart,” I add.

Wendeline frowns. “Did I miss something?”

“Aye, you missed a lot.” Then Ronan launches into telling her as many of the details as he can while I listen to the story, which sounds crazy, and mad, and completely chaotic, and it’s one I would never believe unless I had lived it.

“Time Tunnels?” Wendeline asks, when Ronan finally pauses.

Ronan nods. “Aye. It’s probably why you feel a bit out of sorts. Your memories are trying to line up.”

“I knew it! Tiger Lily told you—”

“I know, Wendie, but it’s the last time, because we’re leaving.” Ronan places his hand over mine where it rests on the railing. “Alessa and I are going home.”

Wendeline licks her lips and looks straight ahead, her eyes glistening with tears I know she will never shed. The three of us are silent as *Vengeance* bobs on the water in Hook Bay, the lights of Neverdrop shining in the distance.

“You can come with us.” I finally break the silence. “You wanted to ... in the past. You were going to.”

Wendeline frowns. “What about everyone else? We can’t leave the crew.”

“You said the same thing then.” I smile, and for the first time, she returns it.

“How could we possibly take everyone?” Ronan asks.

“I don’t know, but what life do they have to look forward to here?” I say. “One of constant fighting with Cordelia or Peter, drifting on the waves of the Neversea? It doesn’t sound like fun.”

“But not all of them belong in Wonderland.”

“You didn’t belong here,” I say. “But you made the most of it. And Home is where your heart is, isn’t it?”

Ronan chuckles at my attempt at a joke. “Aye, which is why I’ve felt torn for so long. Desperate to get to Wonderland, but stuck here in Neverland.” Ronan regards me for a few heartbeats, rubbing his jaw. He glances around at his crew. “We should ask them first, see if they want to come with us.”

A smile spreads across my face. “That’s a yes, then?”

“Aye, they can all come.”

“Those who came from the bottles are from Wonderland anyway,” Wendeline says.

“Bottles?” I look up at Ronan.

“The *Jolly Roger* and *Vengeance* used to be ships in bottles. We made them bigger with growing cake.”

Before I can form a coherent answer, Wendeline puts her fingers in her mouth and unleashes an ear-piercing whistle. Everyone stops what they are doing and gathers on the main deck to look up at their captain, their expressions questioning and hopeful.

“I finally have my key.” Ronon raises his hand, the key hanging from the leather strap between his fingers, and the crew cheer. “Which means,” he continues, “that I can go home to Wonderland. For some of you, Wonderland is your home, too. Which is why I’m giving you the choice to come. Or not. So what say you? Are you up for another adventure?”

The crew send out a roaring cheer, pumping the air with their fists. Lucy beams up at me, and Rose soars into the air, her glitter sparkling against the Neverland night.

“It won’t be easy getting an entire ship through a doorway,” Ronan says.

“You want to bring *Vengeance*?” I ask.

“Of course I want to bring my ship.” Ronan looks at me as though I’ve just asked the stupidest question in the history of all my questions. “I’m not leaving her behind.”

“We could shrink her again,” Wendeline says with a shrug. “I’m sure the faeries will help.”

“That’s a splendid idea. Rose!” Ronan yells, and the pink faerie flits down to his shoulder. “Grab the other faeries. We have a ship to shrink.”

“Aye, Captain.” She streaks across the inky sky towards Tiger Lily’s Garden.

“Wendie, get the crew ashore. I’ll follow with Alessa and the faeries once we have a pocket-sized *Vengeance*. And stay out of the inn. We don’t want to draw any attention.”

For once, Wendeline doesn’t argue, and she gets straight to organising everyone into the dinghy.

“I’ll see you on shore,” I call down to Lucy.

She waves up to me as she follows the others over the gunwale and off the ship. Soon, it’s just Ronan and me, and we watch in silence as the crew row across the bay to shore.

My heart races at the thought of finally being able to see Alice again. I have so much to tell her, but so much to ask her about, too. And I realise that after everything I’ve been through in Neverland, I’m not angry at her anymore for hiding who she is from me. Now I know, so many things make sense.

Ronan tugs my hand and leads me down to the main deck, then into his cabin. He catches me around the waist, pulling me close, and I breathe in the scent of pine and salt as he tucks a lock of hair behind my ear with his hook.

“We’re finally going home,” he whispers. I nod, because I can’t speak. His closeness is intoxicating. “I can’t wait to show you Wonderland.”

Then he kisses me as though there is no one else in the room.

Rose squeals in delight and I jump, heat rushing to my cheeks.

“Don’t stop on my account,” she says with mischief in her voice. “But Tiger Lily, Daisy, and Tink are up on deck.”

“Right, then.” Ronan releases me. He grabs a teacup from the shelf then rummages around in the satchel at his belt, bringing out a bottle of shrinking potion. “We’ll need all four faeries for this.”

Rose and I follow Ronan out of his cabin and back onto the main deck.

“How will this work, exactly?” I ask, never having seen anyone shrink a ship before. “I thought the potions and cakes only worked on people.”

“If you mix in a little faerie dust, anything is possible,” Tiger Lily says.

“We learned that the hard way,” a white and yellow faerie says, staring at Tinker Bell.

“You must be Daisy.” I offer her a smile. “I’m Alessa.”

“What?” Tinker Bell says, before Daisy can speak again. “You can’t tell me you’d rather still be flowers.”

“She’s Alice’s daughter,” Rose whispers behind her hand, ignoring Tinker Bell, but it’s still loud enough for all of us to hear.

“Alice has a daughter?” Daisy practically yells.

“I’ll fill you in later,” Rose adds.

“All right, settle down.” Ronan levels his stare at Tinker Bell. “Before we go any further, I need to know ... Are you with us now, Tink? Are you ready to leave Neverland behind? Or are you going to change your mind?”

“I’m done with Peter,” she says, raising her tiny nose and crossing her arms. “He’s an ass.”

“Aye. I’ve been trying to tell you that this whole time.”

“You better not cause any trouble,” Tiger Lily mumbles.

Tinker Bell huffs, blowing her fringe away from her face.

“If Tink says she’s done with him, then she’s done,” Ronan says. “Now, are you all ready?”

They huddle together, nodding. Ronan sprinkles himself with faerie dust, and I do the same. He hands me the vial of shrinking potion, then holds the teacup under the faeries as they shake and shimmy until the cup is half filled with swirling orange, pink, silver, and green faerie dust.

I uncork the bottle. "All of it?"

"Aye," Ronan says. "She's a pretty big ship. Be ready to fly."

Nodding, I tip the potion into the teacup. Ronan gives it a swish, then tosses the mixture onto the deck. It spreads rapidly, lighting up with sparkling rainbow streaks. Then *Vengeance* shakes as the boards beneath our feet recede and we're standing on nothing but air.

It startles me, and my stomach drops away as I fall. Ronan catches me around my waist and we hover above the lolling waves of the bay.

"I thought I was ready." I laugh. "Obviously I wasn't."

"It's all right, love, I've got you," Ronan says as he lowers us slowly towards the water.

Reaching down, I grab the ship that is now small enough for me to hold with one hand, then we fly with the faeries to Neverdrop, alighting on the jetty where the crew is waiting. I give Lucy a quick hug, and her eyes go wide at the size of what was moments ago a full-sized pirate ship, but is now a toy clutched between my fingers.

"That can't be good," Ronan mutters, staring at the *Crocodile* sitting alongside the wharf. "We'd better hurry. Alessa, a door if you please."

I call on my heart magic, now that I know what it is and that I have it, delving deep to make sure I do this right. I ask it to search for Alice. To search for Wesley. To search for home. Then a door appears, the mushroom handle shining white under the Neverland moon.

For a moment, sadness washes through me. We will probably never return to Neverland, especially if Ronan has anything to say about it, so this is most likely the last time I'll see the full moon that has always been here to guide us through the darkness.

“Quickly, everyone, it’s time to go,” Ronan says.

He opens the door and ushers the crew through one by one. I give *Vengeance* to Lucy as she passes, then wait as the people who have become my friends leave this world that has been so cruel to them in so many ways, and enter one that I’m hoping will become something wonderful. For all of us.

Tiger Lily and Daisy flit over the threshold while Rose alights on my shoulder. I turn to Ronan to offer him my hand, but he has his back to me, his fist tightly clenched at his side.

“What’s the mat—?” But my voice falls away when I reach his side.

“Oh no,” Rose whispers.

“Tinker Bell,” Peter calls into the night. “Where are you going? Get back here. No one leaves Neverland unless I say so.” He clenches his fists and snarls, flanked by the other two forest boys. One holds a spear and the other a slingshot.

The green faerie flits in front of us, her little head swivelling, looking from Peter, to us, the open doorway, and back to Peter.

No, don’t do it, Tink.

“Leave her be, Pan. Your rules don’t apply anymore,” Ronan says.

“The hell they do!” he yells, drawing a dagger from his belt. “No one leaves! Especially not Tinker Bell.”

I flinch, clutching Ronan’s arm. His muscles tense beneath my fingers as he raises his hook. *Come on, Tink. You can’t possibly want to stay here with Peter.*

“Off you go, Tink,” Ronan says quietly. “Go join your friends.”

And she does, grabbing Rose's little hand and flying towards the doorway.

"What's taking so long?" Wendeline asks, ducking as the faeries fly past and she steps back into Neverland. She stops abruptly on Ronan's other side, staring at Peter with his hand poised to throw his weapon, and all the colour drains from her face.

Neither she nor Ronan will be fast enough to draw their swords if Peter lets his dagger fly.

"It's over, Pan," Ronan says. "You wanted Neverland back? Well, it's yours. Just let us be."

Ronan turns away, pulling me with him.

"Ronan!" Wendeline pushes between us and Peter.

Ronan stumbles, falling at the threshold of the doorway, and I go down with him. My knee bangs against the doorjamb, sending a sharp pain up my leg.

Wendeline screams as Peter's dagger impales her upper left arm. She grimaces and clamps her hand around the hilt, screaming again as she pulls the weapon free, the blade coated in scarlet. She holds the knife at her side, and blood drips at her feet.

The ground trembles.

"You!" Peter yells at Wendeline. "You ruined everything the moment I brought you here."

Peter and his Lost Boys stalk towards her and I scramble to my feet, grabbing her to pull her into Wonderland. Ronan jumps up and draws his cutlass, stepping back into Neverland.

Peter comes to a halt, the ground shaking again.

“Looks like you threw your weapon away,” Ronan says. “Not so cocky now, are you?”

“We still have weapons.” The boy with the spear rushes forward, Ronan’s cutlass clanging against the shaft as they connect.

Slingshot Boy pelts Ronan with rocks as he fights, but he doesn’t falter, taking a mighty swing that shears the spear in two. The Lost Boys stare at Ronan with their mouths open, then both of them step back.

“You’re still just a bunch of children,” Ronan says.

Peter scowls as Wendeline and I move farther away from the door. Lucy sidles up to us and clutches my arm, the others crowding in as well.

“Come on, Pan. Come and get me!” Ronan yells. He turns and runs towards us, catching the edge of the door with his hook to pull it closed as he crosses into Wonderland.

It almost makes it, but a hand grabs the edge, fingers slamming between the door and the jamb. *Disappear, disappear*, I chant in my mind, but the door swings open again and Peter hovers in the frame, his brows heavy over dark eyes.

Then Peter and his boys surge across the threshold. Our small group breaks apart, ready to fight. Ronan lunges with his cutlass outstretched. Peter jolts back into Neverland, but not before Ronan runs a gash across his stomach.

Peter cries out, rising into the air. The other two follow their leader, their faces clouded in doubt. Blood drips from Peter’s shirt, splashing onto the ground.

Another rumble sounds from deep within the earth, rising to a crescendo as the tremors rock our feet.

“We broke the rules,” Wendeline says.

Everyone stumbles. The Neverland ground rips open. Ronan grabs me and hauls me away from the doorway. Peter and his Lost Boys fly straight at us, knocking everyone down as they launch themselves into Wonderland.

“No!” Wendeline cries, scrambling to her feet, one hand clutching the bloody dagger and the other clamped over her wound.

I clamber backwards, watching Peter and the Lost Boys until they blend in to the Wonderland forest.

“Where are they going?” Cordelia’s voice sounds from the wharf.

Footsteps thump the broken ground as she runs, framed by the doorway, her men beside her. Ronan scrambles to reach into Neverland to grab the doorhandle, finally pulling it shut. The door slams hard enough to rattle in the frame before it disappears.

“So long, *Crocodile*,” Ronan mumbles.

“What just happened?” I ask.

Ronan helps me to my feet. “We broke the rules. We drew blood. Neverland will fall.”

“Nothing we can do about it now,” Wendeline says.

I stare at her wide-eyed. “What? So Neverland is going to tear itself apart?”

Laughter erupts from the trees above. “You always wanted to destroy my home, Hook.” Peter says. “This isn’t over.”

I search the branches but can't find him. Then I take in our surroundings properly. Dark and gnarly twisted trees covered in blood red fungi. Trails of bright blue vines hanging from the branches. Wet, soggy soil beneath our feet.

An almighty growl ruptures the air.

Wendeline clutches her arm and winces, her eyes filled with pain and fear as she looks to the trees for Peter. Smee scrunches his red hat between his fingers, whimpering, his eyes darting around frantically. Lucy clutches the ship to her chest, then slips her free hand into mine, her fingers trembling. The others search the trees as another low and menacing growl echoes through the forest.

"Peter is the least of our problems," Ronan says.

"Where are we?" I ask, pushing into his side.

"The Howling Woods." He draws the vorpal sword from his belt. "And I suggest we all run."

"Why?" I whisper, unable to keep the tremor from my voice.

"Because the Jabberwock is here, and it's hungry."

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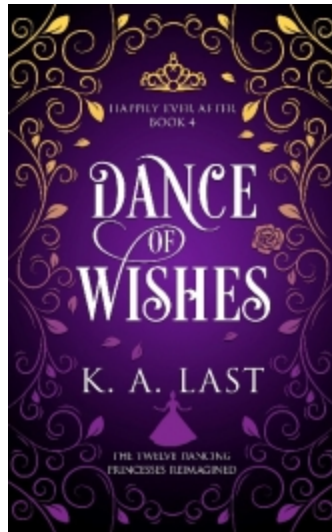
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

K. A. Last is a graphic designer and author blessed with a vivid imagination. She lives in the Australian countryside with her family and a menagerie of animals, where she loves to immerse herself in creativity and nature.

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